

HOW TO PROMOTE INITIATIVE

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[The first series of Reith Lectures, delivered weekly on the BBC by Bertrand Russell in the winter of 1948–49, were a resounding success. They were soon published in book form as Authority and the Individual. However, Russell started late in the year to write them, and manuscripts for the lectures show that he encountered difficulty. Surviving in his archives is a false start on the concluding lecture, “How to Promote Initiative” (filed at RAI 210.006779). Lecture v had been called “Control and Initiative: Their Respective Spheres”. Lecture vi was finally titled “Individual and Social Ethics”, but an early outline had it as “Principles of Reform”.

In the false start Russell described how devolution of authority and individual initiative could be embodied in practice. He provided recipes on how to accomplish this in specific spheres of society: local government, industry, newspapers, books, and education. In replacing the nine leaves of manuscript, he had not come to disagree with them. Instead, as readers of what follows and the final lecture of the book will allow, he now engaged the topic at a higher level. Russell at this time was a friendly critic of the British Labour Party, and his devolutionary reformism is to be seen in that light. Yet his final text transcended politics and engaged his audience at an ethical level, treating of the freedom and duty of conscience, the justifiability of revolution, and life lived as an end. He decided to paint the ideals and let the recipes suggest themselves.—K.B.]

If the general principles advocated in my last lecture are accepted, what can we do practically to give effect to them? Our aim must be to give as much scope to initiative as possible within a large governmental framework. This requires decentralization wherever central con-

control is not essential, and it requires democracy in small units, not only in very large ones. The centralized framework is necessary, but has now, in the main, been created except as regards a world government. The danger now is lest this framework should be thought to be all that is needed. State Socialism exists in Russia, and the prestige of Russia has led many to think that State Socialism is synonymous with Utopia. I believe this to be a profound mistake. Before the Russian Revolution there were syndicalists and guild socialists, whose aims, in my opinion, should be revived. It is true that many of those who formerly, though socialists, feared the omnipotence of the State, forgot their fears in admiration of what seemed to them the successful efficiency of the Soviet régime. But for my part I think it important to remember aims that were prominent before 1917, if nominal reforms are not to produce even worse evils than those that they are intended to cure.

The first and most obvious region in which decentralization is desirable is *local government*. For reasons of which I do not dispute the validity, an increasing part of the finance of local government has come to be paid out of taxes, with the result that the central government, and especially the Treasury, is able more and more to control local authorities, and to forbid any bold scheme which may possibly involve expenditure for which there is not adequate precedent. Owing (to) the method of assessment, rates are more unpopular than taxes. County Councillors and Town Councillors are still unpaid, as Members of Parliament were formerly. These are among the reasons for the very general apathy on questions of local government. There are of course other reasons, quite as important. Whenever there is war or the fear of war, it is natural that political interest should be concentrated on the central government, which has to decide this supremely important issue. Readers of newspapers, for the most part, no longer read truly local newspapers, but journals addressed equally to all parts of the country, and therefore concerned almost wholly with national as opposed to local issues. Interest in party politics has the effect of making voters more interested in elections which decide what party shall have national power than in those that have no such large result.

The consequence of these various causes is that men who are able and imaginative, who have vision as to what the world could be, are not attracted to local politics except in very small numbers. On national politics, few can achieve much. Private members must obey party discipline,

and even the Government may be thwarted at home by the magnitude of world problems. The result is too often a sense of impotence and a general cynicism about politics.

To cure this excessive concentration on national as opposed to local affairs, various reforms are needed. Local authorities should have much more fiscal autonomy, and much more licence to try bold experiments. Their members should be paid, and expected to devote themselves to local government as a profession. There should be rivalry between different towns: in the case of the larger cities, as regards municipal buildings, theatre, music, and so on. Perhaps most important of all, steps should be taken to revive the practice of reading local rather than national newspapers. But this is a matter to which I shall return when I come to consider the Press.

In *industry*, decentralization is now more possible, and also more important, than at any time since the growth of large businesses. Electrification and road transport have done away with the advantages of geographical concentration, while modern methods of warfare (especially atom bombs) have provided a new and compelling reason for dispersion. Nationalization of certain industries was advocated as a means of getting rid of the excessive power of capitalists, but will prove a doubtful blessing if it merely substitutes the excessive power of the State. The State may nominally consist of all the voters, but in practice consists of officials, or of the Cabinet on very important occasions. Take, for example, railways. Employees are almost as likely to find themselves in conflict with the authorities when railways are nationalized as they were formerly to find themselves in conflict with railway companies. Where, as in Russia, the employer-State is firmly established, the employees have far less control over their own conditions of work than they have under capitalism when they are represented by vigorous trade unions.

Railways should still, as before nationalization, be divided into groups, and each group should have a considerable degree of autonomy. There should still be opportunities of rivalry, giving a man a possibility of pride in "his" railway. There should be a limited and controlled financial independence in each group, giving a chance for experiments. Each group, and the railways as a whole, should democratically elect representatives to manage all matters not vitally involving external relations. Officials representing the State should, where their intervention is necessary, be under an obligation to discuss the matter in hand with the em-

ployees' elected representatives, and if no agreement can be reached the final decision should rest with a neutral authority.

The same kind of devolution should be applied to mining, and to every other industry sufficiently important and unified to be regarded as a proper subject for nationalization. Unless something of this sort is done, there will be merely a substitution of bureaucracy for capitalism, which will leave workers at least as impotent as before, and will remove the stimulus to technical initiative which the profit motive, however inadequately, has hitherto supplied.

Newspapers have always presented a problem to those who wish to combine socialism with such things as party government and freedom of the Press. If newspapers, and means of propaganda generally, are entirely controlled by the government, there is no longer any genuine liberty, and the authorities can be guilty of atrocious behaviour without the facts becoming widely known and without any means of redress for the victims. On the other hand, the present state of the Press, in countries where it is left to the operation of the profit motive, is far from satisfactory. A very few great newspaper proprietors own all widely read journals. These few firms can decide what news shall be made prominent, and what shall only be accessible to the small minority who read weeklies or official publications. The same kind of reasons which make State ownership of newspapers undesirable make it regrettable that there is at present so little diversity. It would be a good thing, as I suggested earlier, if local newspapers could be revived. Perhaps the best method would be to make a law that no one firm is to sell more than a certain number of copies, whether of one newspaper or of several. Monopoly, whether private or public, partial or complete, is most undesirable where news is concerned, both because uniformity in news is an evil, and because monopoly gives too much power to its possessor. Neither socialism nor unrestricted capitalism secures sufficient variety in journalism, and therefore diversity should be insured by legal restrictions on enormous sales by any one firm.

Books raise similar but not quite identical problems. It appears from history that every important innovation, however admirable, will fail to win the support of the authorities except in rare and exceptional circumstances. If the State had had a monopoly of book publication, Darwin's *Origin of Species* and *Descent of Man* would never have been printed. At the present day in Russia, where genetics are concerned, only publica-

tions which are scientifically reactionary are allowed, and no unbiased appeal to the experimental evidence is tolerated. And there are signs that this obscurantist control is to be extended to other departments of science. It is a general rule (though not *quite* an invariable one) that the most important books appeal, at first, only to a minority, and rouse vehement hostility in the majority of those who become aware of them. It is therefore essential to intellectual progress that there should be means by which books can be published which appeal only to an unpopular minority. This is not possible if a book cannot be published without a government licence, nor even if it requires the licence of some central learned academy. There must be diversity of publishing houses, not financially dependent upon government grants, for otherwise there will soon be a dull uniformity, preventing any important innovation from getting a hearing.

Education is one of the most difficult matters in which to strike a balance between the State and other authorities, and at the same time one of the most important. Clearly the State must *insist* on a certain minimum, and *encourage* what goes beyond the minimum, provided what goes beyond is not controversial. But those who wish their children taught something which most parents do not wish their children to learn should be able to provide or support schools of the kind that they prefer. From time to time, innovations in curriculum or education methods are advocated by people whose opinions deserve to be tested by experiment. There should be a legal and a financial opportunity for such experiments to be tried.

With regard to university education, it is of the highest importance that universities should be self-governing, subject to control when gross evils have been established. The alternative is control by politicians, as in Russia. Control by politicians is absurd, because in general politicians cannot be expected to be competent judges in matters of higher learning. Moreover control by politicians is likely to introduce uniformity throughout the territory controlled by one government, and in those matters uniformity is likely to be disastrous, since, sooner or later, it will mean perpetuation of traditional error.

In some respects we in this country have already achieved a very happy balance between central control and private initiative. The B.B.C., for example, is ultimately subject to Parliament, but in the meantime has independence and its own source of revenue. It does not favour this

opinion or that, but endeavours to be fair in offering expression to different sides on controversial issues. In America, where broadcasting is a matter of commercial competition, experience convinced me that the public is not so well served as it is here. The principle embodied in the B.B.C. is one which is capable of wide application. The principle is the creation, under parliamentary sanction, of a corporation having its own management and its own independent source of revenue, and only subject to control on rare occasions after it has been proved to give cause for wide-spread dissatisfaction. The monopoly enjoyed by the B.B.C. is justified for technical reasons, but institutions having a similar relation to government—for instance, universities—ought not, as a rule, to enjoy a legal monopoly.

It is by an extension of this method that the necessary minimum of State control can be best combined with the desirable maximum of freedom for individuals and groups.
