

FREEDOM IN MODERN SOCIETY

**I have mislaid the record of how, and to what audience, this speech came to be delivered years ago. I would not seek to amend it.*

It is a good thing for a Cabinet Minister to get away occasionally from the 'practical affairs' of politics, with its inevitable compromises and second-bests, to work out his individual philosophy. That means, of course, that to a large extent in this address, I will be talking to myself, and you must regard yourselves as more or less interested listeners-in.

It is commonly thought that the essential starting point for any dialectical or semi-dialectical speech is to define your terms. I propose to violate that rule. How can I hope to define 'freedom' or 'liberty'? How can I expect to set any intelligible bounds to the phrase 'modern society'?

Speaking at Baltimore in 1864, Abraham Lincoln said:-

The world has never had a good definition of the word 'liberty', and the American people, just now, are much in need of one. We all declare for liberty but in using the same word we do not all mean the same thing. With some, the word 'liberty' may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself and the product of his labour; while others, the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men and the product of other men's labour...

The shepherd drives the wolf from the sheep's throat, for which the sheep thanks the shepherd as his liberator, while the wolf denounces him for the same act as the destroyer of liberty, especially as the sheep was a black one.

The difficulty of definition is certainly not one that I can solve on the threshold, and I am, therefore, afraid that you must simply accompany me along the line of my thoughts, hoping, as I do, that some sort of definition by implication will sooner or later manifest itself.

What I propose to do is to talk about certain aspects of modern civilization, and to confine matters to some analysis of the relationships which exist or should exist between that civilization and the liberty of the individual.

It is a trite saying that we live in a mechanical age. In my own lifetime man has harnessed and directed the forces of electricity; has navigated the world's airways; by the miracle of electronics, transmits sounds and pictures, human and otherwise, to the uttermost corners of the earth. The development of applied science has bereft us of our capacity for surprise, and has above all induced in us a rather naïve vanity about our progress, not unassociated with a half-formed pity for our grandfathers, who lived in the uncivilized shadows of the nineteenth century. Now, it seems to me that these modern wonders are no necessary proof of advancing civilization at all. By wise people they may be made an instrument of civilization, but civilization itself remains as something that resides in the human mind and the human spirit, and not something that can be turned on by a switch, or discovered in the roar of an aeroplane engine.

That really brings me to the proposition I desire to affirm: that the test of civilization is freedom, freedom of the spirit and of the mind and of the body. Man does not achieve his

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liberty by striking off the shackles of physical slavery. His very ingenuity as a mechanic may build for him a more intolerable master, a sort of electronic Frankenstein.

All things considered, we have probably made our greatest advances in the realm of bodily freedom. Most of our current materialist political philosophy has been directed to the attainment of a higher degree of bodily well-being. Food is probably better, and certainly more plentiful. Clothing has become more rational, if less picturesque. Exhaustion has been minimized by a drastic overhaul of the working week. Medical science, sanitation, the higher organization of public health, have all conspired successfully to attack disease and to prolong life. Physical exercise is increasingly combating the tendency, which modern invention might otherwise stimulate, to deprive us of the necessity for having strong limbs. All these things are good, since the body is, after all, the temple of the spirit, and the spirit should be well housed. But the conception of a liberated body inhabited by a stunted mind and a poor spirit is not a noble one. It is, therefore, to the problem of mental and spiritual freedom that we must turn if we are to assess accurately the place that freedom is taking in our modern civilization.

I am not disposed unduly to set up artificial boundaries between the problem of the free mind and the problem of the free spirit. The truth is that they are inextricably bound up together. The mind is the doorway to the spirit. 'And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.' Every one of us is perhaps over-inclined to say, 'I have a free mind, because I can think what I like.' Nothing could be more erroneous. If the conditions of my thinking and the objective materials for my thinking are both falsified, the only freedom which I can achieve is a spurious one. The spirit of man can be touched to the finest issues; it can 'soar as a wild white bird, with a song unbound and fetterless', but it can never hope to do so if it is earthbound by a mind which is groping in ignorance or blinded by prejudice and passion. It follows that no society can confer the benefit of mental or spiritual freedom upon its members unless at the same time it encourages the search for truth and the fearless facing of the problems of the intellect.

Let me now turn to a practical consideration of the state of affairs which surround us. There has been a great deal of discussion, and very valuable and necessary discussion it is, about the conflict of ideas which we see in the world between the totalitarian and the democratic states. If we are to determine our own problems, we are entitled and indeed bound to examine quite clearly the differences of ideas which make one country turn to a dictatorship and another country adhere to parliamentary rule. In our own case, we adhere to parliamentary rule because in a more or less ill-defined fashion we feel that the chief end of totalitarianism is to glorify power and enjoy it for ever, while the chief end of democracy is the achievement of individual freedom and development. In Lord Acton's picturesque phrase, we believe that 'the ship exists for the sake of the passengers'. We are no believers in an authority which moves independently of the public will. We are still ready to say, as Algernon Sidney said three hundred years ago, that 'the strength of the Magistrate is in the nation'. We are as proud of our national prestige and strength as anyone well can be without becoming insufferable, but we still believe that the free growth of the individual and the measure of his attainment of the good life, are the real proofs and the ultimate justification of that power and that prestige. 'Dictatorship,' as the late Lord Baldwin said, 'is like a giant beech tree, very magnificent to look at in its prime, but nothing grows under it.'

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But when we have said these things, and have proclaimed our democratic faith, we are a little tempted to think that the discussion has ended. 'We thank Thee, Lord, that we are not as other men, or even as these poor Russians.' We have, in fact, by no means solved the problem. 'Faith without works is in vain.' All that we have done is to commit ourselves to an examination of our own system, not that we may smugly contemplate its perfection, but that we may frankly ask ourselves what its imperfections are, and what we are going to do about them. All this requires conscious thought, and indeed eternal vigilance. We are accustomed to the phenomenon of the trade cycle; let us also remember that there are other cycles, and that one of them, readily enough discernible in modern European history, is the cycle by which liberty degenerates into licence, licence produces its inevitable reaction, and the reaction re-establishes the rigours of authority.

Let us then test our democratic freedom by a few pertinent questions.

Do we possess free minds? We do not answer this question by pointing to our widespread and excellent system of free primary education, or by quoting the statistics of our universities, or by reciting our immemorial rights of free speech and free opinion. Our minds can be set free only by the truth. Are our conditions of life such as to enable us to come at the truth? It is, for example, true to say that we have an unlicensed and uncensored press, yet everybody knows that the modern tendency to convert the old newspaper of independent ideas into a joint stock company with readers to please and circulation to increase and shareholders to satisfy is doing much to cloud the truth. Truth is not always palatable, but if the press is to apply the commercial principle selling to the people what the people want to buy, unpalatable things will not find their place on the journalistic menu. Profoundly as I believe in the ultimate sense of justice of a British community, I have no sort of belief in the wisdom of snap popular decisions arrived at in an atmosphere of evanescent passion. Yet one cannot but observe that the older notion of the sober presentation of facts is everywhere giving place to the diabolical doctrines of propaganda which, applied on a sufficiently large scale, are almost elevated to the dignity of statesmanship, though, when practised individually, they still produce difficulties in the ordinary courts of law.

There are other modern matters which tend to stand between the individual and the light of truth. Wireless broadcasting, with all its amazing potentialities for good, is still too intimately associated with shoddy emotionalism and a playing down to the worst, both in art and in life. The cinema, which occasionally astonishes us with its power and its beauty, still too frequently assumes that its spectators have the mentality of backward children, and continues to feed their imaginations with an absurd diet of false sentiment and falser values. And these things are not all. There is a real tendency among us to forget that the truth is not always easy to discover. Work is necessary; not somebody else's work, but our own. I confess that occasionally when I read the reports of educational congresses and acquaint myself with some of the modern theories of education, I have a restless momentary desire to go along and shout out my old-fashioned credo: 'There can be no substitute for individual work.' Pre-digested food is for infants and invalids. The more I see and hear of the well-meaning nonsense which is talked about homework and examinations, the more I wonder whether our new ambition is to breed up a race of people to whom leisure is the chief end of life and the insistence upon a standard of accuracy abhorrent. If it be true that the truth lies at the bottom of a deep well, it is equally true that the well must be excavated.

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And so it seems to me that, properly considered, the great issue today is the issue of freedom; the defence of freedom, the development of freedom.

Let us remember the attack is not always frontal. I have known effective cross-examiners whose attacks upon the witness in the box resembled the blows of a sledge-hammer; but I have known much better cross-examiners who (if I may use so deplorable a metaphor in describing so great an art) stole upon their victim like a thief in the night. Freedom can be attacked obviously from without; subtly from without; or from within. Let me make a few observations about each method of attack.

The obvious attack upon freedom, by forces which are external to the individual, is well illustrated in the doctrines of totalitarianism. Government by the consent of the governed disappears. The law loses all its significance as a social contract, and appears to be based solely upon authority. Liberties cease to be a birthright, and are converted into a concession by the state. The press is muzzled and directed, the broadcasting stations play one tune, the citizen is protected against the dangerous impact of ideas by having the materials for his thinking carefully edited and selected and rationed out. In a highly nationalistic world, this policy has its points. It tends to produce simple and obedient minds, which are readily attuned to one another and are therefore perfect material for mass demonstrations and organized patriotism. I do not greatly fear this kind of obvious attack in a British country. Our roots are too deep in the very soil of freedom. When the pursuit of freedom has been the moving force of a nation's history, that nation does not lightly submit to a slavery crudely imposed from without.

But there is another attack by external forces which is much more subtle. I have already made some reference to it. If the truth which is to make us free is suppressed, our freedom is impaired, whether we like it or not and whether we know it or not. I have said something of this age of propaganda and false values. Let me add to it a reminder that blind partisanship and gross selfishness are still far too easily appealed to and traded upon. The attractively false short view too often prevails over the ultimately wise course. The 'good politician' becomes that one who best knows how to cater for the shallow and prejudiced judgments of the moment, and not the one described in the noble words of Bolingbroke, who 'considers his administration as a single day in the great year of government; but as a day that is affected by those which went before, and that must affect those which are to follow.' If we were all really free men, we would demand the truth, we would applaud the rare courage to stand up against popular passion, we would work for the politics of service and despise the easy and shiftless politics of profit. But do we? The best proof that we do not is to be found in the fact that too many electioneering speeches are appeals to our selfishness and seek to dazzle our eyes, either with the promise of something for nothing, or with the somewhat more exciting promise of something at the expense of the other fellow.

But the subtlest of all attacks on freedom is the one which comes from within. We have a great instinct towards comfort, and in this world there is much comfort to be got by leaving difficulties to somebody else. I wonder if we always realize that, when we shrink from the arduous labours of thought and abdicate the responsibility of judgment in favour of somebody else, we to that extent make ourselves slaves to somebody else. The formal homage and slave's collar of early feudalism have gone, but there will always be a feudalism of the mind so long as most of us are prepared to live in a state of intellectual villeinage.

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The motto of my old school is ‘*sapere aude*’ – ‘dare to be wise’. It is an excellent summary of a vital exhortation. The truth is not always comfortable, and however conventional morality may constrain us to tell the truth to other people, it is so easy not to tell it to ourselves. Honesty of mind is still the rarest of intellectual gifts, just as moral courage is among the rarest of social virtues.

And yet, without minds that are informed, toughened by exercise, broadened by enquiry and fearless in pursuing the truth wherever it may lead, we may never hope to have spirits untrammelled by blinding ignorance or distorting prejudice. And without free minds and free spirits our boasted civic freedom becomes an empty shell.

Let me endeavour to extract from these discursive observations a few working principles of immediate practical concern to all those of us to whom freedom is the breath of life.

First, we must avoid the common fallacy of supposing that freedom and discipline are inconsistent. It was that rugged thinker, Jeremy Bentham, who said that the mark of a good citizen was ‘to censure freely and to obey punctually’. The notion is, after all, not a complex one. The discipline we must look for is not the discipline of the slave, but the discipline of the volunteer. Such discipline does not take the form of a compulsory obedience to a higher authority, but is based upon an intelligent understanding of the fact that order and sanity are essential if the liberty of the individual is to be reconciled with the rights of other individuals. For many people, the desire for freedom appears to connote an impatience of government or, at the very least, an indifference to government. Such a view is among the deadliest enemies of liberty, for the responsible individual, not the irresponsible individual, is the real basis of a truly free society.

Second, we must get a clearer view of the supreme importance of the individual. General Smuts, speaking at St Andrews University many years ago, said something on this matter which I would like to hang in every Parliament and Party room, and preach in every school and university. He said:

There is today a decay of the individual's responsibility and share in government which seems to strike at the roots of our human advance. For me the individual is basic to any world-order that is worthwhile. Individual freedom, individual independence of mind, individual participation in the difficult work of government seems to me essential to all true progress. Yet today the individual seems more and more at a discount in the new experiments in government which are being tried out. The sturdy individualism which inspired progress in the past, which made Rome, which made Scotland, which has created all our best human values, seems to be decaying in the atmosphere of confusion and disillusion of our day. Men and women have suffered until they are abdicating their rights as individuals. In their misery and helplessness they are surrendering to the mass will which leads straight to autocracy.

These dangers could be abundantly illustrated from our own experience. One of our most highly developed arts appears to be that of transferring our burdens to somebody else's shoulders. There was a time (or so I imagine) when misfortunes tended to drive a man inwards, on to his own resources; a process which developed fortitude and ingenuity, the two great qualities which go to make up the pioneering spirit. But today, faced with the same find

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of misfortune, we are all too inclined to turn outwards to the resources of others; a process of mind which breeds neither fortitude nor ingenuity, unless perhaps it is the misplaced ingenuity of the safe-breaker. When I say this, I do not mean to suggest that all virtue has gone from us. I am merely pointing out that our present fashion is a bad one; that the pioneering qualities which are latent in all of us need to be appealed to; that we are listening to too many false prophets. The old hatred of dependence is temporarily at a discount. And the danger of all this is not merely that it weakens the backbone, but that it also saps the spirit. As General Smuts said, 'The disappearance of the sturdy, independent minded, freedom-loving individual, and his replacement by a servile, standardized mass mentality is the greatest human menace of our time.'

My protest is against that false humanitarianism which does not strengthen but corrupts; which does not rest upon the view that I am my brother's keeper, a view which is the noblest embodiment of the Christian philosophy, but rests upon the belief that my brother should be my keeper, and that I should leave my troubles to him. The protection of the poor and the weak, and the elimination of the causes of poverty and weakness are undoubtedly the supreme business of politics. One can recognize that without in any way ceasing to insist that the first duty of every man is to do his utmost to stand on his own feet, to form his own judgments, and to accept his own responsibilities.

Third, we must reassert the truth, that materialism is not enough. Man does not live by bread alone. A slavery to the gods of material well-being is a degrading slavery. We have inherited great spiritual traditions of unselfish service. I know that it is not uncommon to interpret the history of the British people in terms of grasping mercantile ambition. Personally, I cannot accept this. It is true that they have achieved great national wealth by having a shrewd eye for a bargain, as well as a reputation for honouring their bond. But the British people could never have achieved their present position in the world without a high spirit and a wide vision. The best proof that they have never regarded materialism as enough is to be found in the loftiness and purity of British public life, and the fact that the British Parliament still attracts to its service men who 'have a hand to burn for their Country and their Friend.'

Fourth, we must perennially remind ourselves that the guarantee of civic freedom is the certainty and impartiality of justice. Erskine put this into its precise form when, in addressing the jury in defence of Tom Paine, in 1792, he said:-

If I were to ask you, Gentlemen of the Jury, what is the choicest fruit that grows upon the tree of English liberty, you would answer, 'Security under the law'. If I were to ask the whole people of England the return they looked for at the hands of Government for the burdens under which they bend to support it, I should still be answered, 'Security under the law.'

In modern our (?? our modern??) Australian history one can detect various symptoms of an unconscious carelessness on this matter; a carelessness by which we expose ourselves to the risk of a degradation of justice by our occasional failure to realize the vital significance of the office of the judge and the magistrate. Whenever I hear judicial appointments being discussed solely in terms of party politics, and a judicial office being treated as a job which ought to go by way of reward to this man or that, I have sharp spasm of fear for the safety of our foundations. Character, learning, impartiality, and a devotion to the principles for justice are the handmaidens of legal security.

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Fifth, we must get for ourselves a sounder conception of the function of education. It is quite true that in the modern world technique is of growing importance, and there is, therefore, an urgent need for technical training. Indeed, I would willingly admit that we are not doing enough to encourage the acquisition of skill, either directly, by means of training establishments, or indirectly, by means of adequate extra payment to the skilled man. But, at the same time, the notion that education is a preparation for a living and not for a life is altogether too prevalent. There is current a sort of contempt for the humanities or for what people are pleased to call non-utilitarian studies, and a growing inclination to direct the mind of the child exclusively along those channels which will ultimately lead him to most-favoured-nation treatment from his bank manager. This is where the old-fashioned tradition of the English public school still has much to teach us. Technique is good, but humanity is better. We may become supremely good at our own speciality, and yet have no knowledge of the world or of the people who live in it, or of their problems, and none of that spiritual enlightenment which alone can bring a man to his full growth. Slavery to the machine is by no means solely illustrated by the repetitive work of the mechanic at the moving belt in a mass production factory; it can be even better illustrated by the educational process which denies the mind of a growing child the rich cultivation of humane letter, and forces him too early into the narrow mould of the 'practical work' he is to do in the world.

Sixth, and perhaps above all, we must realize with clarity that the whole principle of individual freedom in an ordered society is not 'Each for himself and the devil take the hindmost' but, as the lawyers would say: '*Sic utere tuo ut alienum non laedas*' – 'So use your own that you do not injure another's.' This great maxim is not only at the root of much of our civil law; it is the whole basis of civil order, since it states with precision the limits which we must always be willing to place upon our own liberty if true social liberty is to be achieved.

The maxim serves as a constant reminder that we cannot decently or sensibly talk about our rights without also admitting our duties. By drawing attention to the existence of others and the rights of others, it has a lesson to teach to all sorts of people, from road-hogs and profiteers at one end of the numerical scale, to intolerant majorities at the other. Here, indeed, is the final, though paradoxical truth; that although the essence of democracy is that the majority shall rule, democracy can never be the real instrument of freedom unless its majorities are constantly tender for the rights of their minorities. The picture of our Elysium is not of a place where freedom is to the strong, but of a place where freedom is to the weak; where the majority will rule, but will insist upon the minority's right to disagree with them; where the humblest citizen will punctually and indeed reverently obey the law because, though it may be a poor thing, it is his own.