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What's the Matter With Us- Centralization and Paternalism, circa 1915-1916

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"WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH US-
CENTRALIZATION AND PATERNALISM"

By

Huntington Wilson.

From **The Paget Literary Agency**
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What's the Matter with us - 2nd. Article.

Centralization and Paternalism.

In another article I ventured to suggest an instrumentality for making effective, in the nation's political life, the vast number of honest, patriotic, and intelligent citizens who are now politically quite ineffective; for arousing the mass of the people to informed and active participation in public life; for pledging the brains and character of the white South to free voting on national issues: in short for creating and galvanizing to victorious activity a real American public opinion.

A nation's strength is in its spiritual solidarity and in the quality and force of its spirit. A hundred million spirited people, however high and fine their spirit, may make a spiritless and therefore a weak nation, if the aspirations of the individuals, that is, their spiritual forces, are dissipated in a thousand individual aims. To generate spiritual solidarity there must be set before the citizens certain aims which all may share: a large part of the aspirations of all must be polarized in such a fashion as to become the common national aspirations, the self-conscious national purpose.

The German government knew this and made propaganda of patriotism, national consciousness, and national aims a large element in the education of the German people, while they supplied a wonderful technical training in order that the national spirit might find expression in good works. Universal military service supplied the crowning unification of the national spirit while it subserved also national efficiency, and afforded the means, at least, of national safety. A common aim, discipline, and efficiency might have been the happy result; but, given the German character, the discipline was overdone. Instead of the high goal of real spiritual solidarity there was evolved too great subserviency of intellect and spirit, too great a dependence upon guidance by the Prussian ruling class. Their's is the exact antithesis of our situation. Instead of a government listening in vain for a sound popular mandate, as with us, we see in Germany a people listening for wise guidance and getting it in their internal affairs, but getting orders also to conquer the world on the principle that might makes right.

But the Germans knew that spiritual solidarity, or the nearest equivalent, were necessary to national strength. We need not imitate their too leveling excess, nor need we admire their cynical pragmatism nor their unchivalrous jettison of moral standards in the ruthless will to achieve. But we must learn from them that spiritual solidarity, concentrated in a strong national will to some purpose, and discipline, are conditions of national strength.

Although far behind the Germans were the French, before this war, and still farther were the English, nevertheless a thousand French or British, taken at random, would react in unison to certain sets of facts bearing upon the present actualities and the future of their countries. The spiritual solidarity of the Japanese, like their efficiency, probably reached the zenith at the time of the Russo-Japanese war. They still possess it to a high degree in spite of heavy draughts of western thought and consequent cleavages in opinion. But fancy a thousand Americans, picked at random, and confronted, say, with a question of American policy, - even a slightly mixed question under the Monroe Doctrine, - and compare their response. To gain a unanimous reaction our orators fall back upon some cry of the past; some cry usually dangerous and unsound when applied to today's problems. Uniformity of reaction to a certain number of sets of facts is the test of spiritual and intellectual solidarity. We do not meet the test well.

Given the American character, there is no fear of over-discipline. Even if we were sure there would never be another war we ought to have universal military service. We ought to put more uniformity, patriotism, and sense of duty and of ideals into our educational system. Success and money must be restored to their proper place below virtue and service as objects of worship. And above all must we set before our eyes some definite national aims.

British institutions are pointed to as a gradual growth, with little conscious purpose in their building. New forms and methods of government, like new religions, sometimes came about in spasms of reaction against life as it had become. Neither method is suitable to the conditions of today. Modern life is "speeded up" to a terrific pace. Man has "made things hum" verily. He cannot leave his government the only thing left to the mercy of gradual growth. His constructive genius must reorganize government so that it shall keep pace with the scale and speed of the rest of his life. To neglect this is to prepare the way for reform by spasm. And how infinitely dangerous and costly that will be in the vast and complicated society of today.

American history has been a long, often unconscious, fight to put down excessive individualism. Before the civil war this individualism asserted itself chiefly by state groups and was ever jealous of any extension of care for national interests by the national government. In recent decades the sheer demand for uniformity and efficiency, as well as the lure of the federal treasury, has with startling rapidity seen the whole country turn to the national government for aid and for regulation in nearly every field of human welfare. The political party which used to raise the banner of "States' Rights" has joined the van of this irresistible movement to substitute national for local government in all national concerns, whether the constitution

had looked forward to their federal or to their state control.

This is as it should be. The dual system of state and national regulation of national affairs is obviously complicated, wasteful, and inefficient as a system. Besides, no country is so densely populated with statesmen as to be able to fill with men of wisdom, lofty character, intelligence, and high education forty-eight large legislatures, countless state executive and judicial offices, and the innumerable offices of complex municipalities and of counties. It simply cannot be done. Our municipalities have been scandals of extravagance and bad service and our state legislatures have so muddled matters of national interest that the people have turned in despair to the national government. The supply of talent available for the national government is cut down by the local demand. As one of our modern writers has intimated, a state governor elected, subject to recall on a definite platform, and supplied with a few experts in law-drafting, would probably run a state more efficiently and infinitely more economically than is done by the present elaborate state government. Such have been the corresponding results where a small commission has been substituted for an elaborate municipal government.

The evolution, then, is towards the gradual decay of state government as a participant in other than purely local affairs. In business, when a machine no longer pays, it is scrapped. As

the work of state government is cut down to purely local concerns, the state machinery can be cut down and simplified. Evolution should be met half way with a plan. If we could take the two dozen wisest men in the country and lock them up like a jury for a few months they would doubtless come out with an excellent plan. But to get that result through forty-eight legislatures and a huge national congress in a few years is a much more doubtful hope. Anyhow, centralization has arrived. The principle has at last won. The task now is to face the fact and to adapt our system to it.

With the new nationalization of our government and the concentration at Washington of the sovereign authority we must not fall into another error, another violation of the rules of efficiency. Already we are piling up vast buildings and a vast personnel. With the centralization of authority and of legislation upon national affairs, we must have a certain decentralization of administration. One of our old cries is the laudation of "government of laws, not of men." Really we suffer from too many laws and not enough able administration. Legislation cannot go into every detail. It must vest discretion as in the Interstate Commerce Commission and the increasing number of such bodies we have and shall require.

The federal reserve bank zones may have blazed the way. In them we may find a clue suggesting such zones for the ~~im~~fringing of national administration upon the people in groups of states.

The centres of such zones might become sub-capitals of the nation, the centres of the federal administrative and judiciary activities corresponding to the surrounding states, the locations of the great federal garrisons and training schools that are to come with universal military service, the sites of a few real universities. This new prestige would also tend to give the cities concerned a local leadership in learning, art, music, and so forth; so that in them might be concentrated a part of life which we have now spread so thin over the whole country that many of those who hunger for beautiful things and for concentrated intellectual life must travel too far to find them in satisfactory quantity.

Another thing that has been quietly creeping in to the national idea is paternalism in government. Paternalism has arrived, in principle, and has come to stay. We may blink at it as a horrid apparition. We may rattle the dead bones of laissez faire theory. But this is true. Here again it will be better to make a plan and to meet evolution half way, instead of trusting to gradual growth at the risk of political and social spasm. If we meant it when we said our government was for the people, when we said its aim was "the greatest good of the greatest number," how can we dodge the conclusion that our welfare lies in paternalism? To the father of a family is delegated by custom the family's

object of caring for the family, of existing for the greatest good of the family. To the government the body politic, which is the nation viewed as a family, delegates the similar object of its existence, that is the care of itself, the nation, and the greatest good of itself, the nation. The immense complexities of modern life, the inequalities of wealth and opportunity, a thousand things have made it impossible for the nation to care for itself and to achieve its greatest good effectively while acting only through individual or group agencies. The nation needs its own full power, that is its government, for those vast tasks.

The French Court at Versailles failed to meet social and political evolution half way. Caught without a plan it saw reform by social spasm. The powerful are slow to learn jiujitsu, the art of fighting by yielding scientifically. They are so tenacious of more than they have a moral right to that they risk and often lose all rather than help in making a plan to secure them their just dues. Capital has had to yield to the progressive income tax, to the regulation of railway rates, and in a few other details which mark the beginning. Indirect price fixing through the limitation of corporate profits would have been an easy step from federal incorporation as proposed before 1913. Strict regulation and the limitation of profits, except perhaps for the first years of new and beneficial enterprises, is de-

voutly to be hoped for. The national family does not want to take over every member's work, but it does not wish to conduct itself for the benefit of any group of spoiled children, whether of the capitalistic or of the labor persuasion.

The "rights" of both capital and labor must capitulate to the paramount equities of the nation of which they are parts. What is, in each field, a proper number of hours of labor, and what is a fair and adequate wage would seem to be questions of the moral, mental, and physical welfare of the people. They should not be left entirely to "collective bargaining," as if the state were disinterested. The moral, mental, and physical welfare of its members are the chief concern of a family. Because the nation is a big family, why should it be expected to be indifferent to and aloof from those same concerns? On the contrary the moral, mental, and physical welfare of the people are the people's, and therefore the state's, most vital interest.

From this it follows that besides much regulation of the activities of capital, government must take a hand in ~~the~~ matters of wages, working hours, and conditions, including housing, insurance, sanitation, and many other things. And in doing so it must take a hand in standardizing efficiency, for neither is the laborer worthy of his hire nor the capitalist of his return unless each is giving the nation good value.

Do the promises of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happi-

ness mean "Live, be free, be happy - and be damned."? They do according to the ancient theories of laissez faire still in vogue among many who think we still want "as little government as possible" and who are often those whom prosperity enchants with the status quo. What is "life" to the sick man who cannot pay a doctor or does not know where to find a good one? What is happiness to a highly paid laborer whose shanty is on an ash-heap, whose breath is factory stench, whose outlook is hideous devastation? What is liberty to the man for whom the nation finds no place in its mechanism of living?

Of course a federal department of health is clearly demanded. The recruiting of a large proportion of the medical profession as civil servants of the state is desirable. Hospitals, play grounds, public baths, social centres, libraries, (accessible and quick working courts, a nation wide labor exchange), are among the things that should be put within the reach of all in every community. In taxing themselves for such things the people would act directly to improve their life. By coordinating such agencies in an intelligible plan instead of leaving them largely to the haphazard of philanthropy, and by placing all such agencies, including the private ones, under the controlling guidance of a national department of health and welfare, there would be hope of making "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" mean something to the nation at large.

For universal service in time of war we shall require the

are the same, we are shocked at these European innovations, registration in advance of all the people in the country, with facts as to their capabilities. This will assist greatly if the nation attempts seriously to redeem the promises made itself in its declarations about "life liberty and happiness," about "the greatest good of the greatest number," about government "for the people." If serious attempt were made to redeem those promises there need be no starvation amidst plenty, no honest work without a living wage, no permitted suffering through wilful idleness. Today we have all these things. We have the worst criminal statistics in the world. We have chaos twice confounded. We, with our fine promises, are doing less, governmentally, than many a monarchy is doing for the public welfare.

The European war has shown what democracies like Great Britain and France have had to do and have been able to do to achieve efficiency for a great national purpose. They concentrate delegated power for quick decision. Their governments become in ^{the} highest degree representative. They limit profits. They compel service. They take over services where necessary. They assume an intensely paternalistic care of the nation. Can we learn by their example, or must we, too, wait to be taught by war? It is not war, but war's absolute demand for efficiency, that has driven Europe into frank paternalism. In America, where we are so backward in political and social thought, where we do not seem to believe, at heart, that the true interests of each and of all

are the same, we are shocked at those European innovations. Thinking as usual only of material things, we begin to discuss the need of meeting in commercial competition the efficiency to be looked for in Europe's paternalism enhanced and developed by the war. A "practical" people, we are shocked at paternalism while admitting its efficiency!

Even while blessed with peace, have we not enough to war upon in our own country, if we have any conscience about the promises of our democracy, to make it worth our while now to plan efficiency, through paternalism, - efficiency to make our national life worth living, as well as to protect it from foreign assault?