REITH LECTURES 1954: Britain and the Tide of World Affairs

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Lecture 6: The Will to Greatness

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We have to make a choice in the next ten, perhaps in the next fifteen, years. We can live half in a dream and behave as if the world had not changed greatly or our position in it. We can live as if we need not bestir ourselves; as if the British Commonwealth was sure to go on of its own accord; as if it did not matter whether we get the Americans wrong or they misunderstand us; as if Europe was still the Europe we used to know; as if we could ignore the direct connection between the effort we make at home, our flexibility and efficiency in production, and our prospects in the world. Or we can live wide-awake to the changes round us and take our opportunity. We can be leaders and have a position out of all proportion to our population or our physical resources. We can make a real contribution to settling the great problems of the world.

I have said little about these problems: the division between the communist bloc and the rest of us, the new nationalism of Asia, the steady increase of armaments, atomic and hydrogen bombs. I have left them out on purpose. I am sure we can brood too much on the Iron Curtain and the metaphysics of coexistence; an the possibilities of a third world war and mass destruction. We can be so fascinated by the dangers we contemplate that we lose the power to act. Sudden and uncontrollable catastrophe is possible, but it is no good looking at the future simply in terms of that hypothesis. The probability is that these problems and dangers are all long-term. We are going to go on living with them. There are no quick answers. I think it is obvious that we have a contribution to make. We have a sense of history. We know how to combine resolution in purpose with moderation in action. We are accustomed to making time an ally, but not an excuse. We might make the difference between peace and war.

The Choice before Us

We therefore face a moral issue. By our choice we shall declare what sort of people we are. My reading of history is that the British people have always been prepared to undertake and carry through what they believed necessary for the continuing greatness of their country. They have, shown this in time of war ‘and they have shown it again in these years of troubled peace. But their readiness always depends on a condition. It is this. They must see clearly and be convinced that what is said to be necessary really is so. How, are we to reach conviction and stop being in danger of gently deceiving ourselves, pretending that we do not really face such a choice, or hoping that what we should like will happen anyhow, without our having to bother?

I said that the choice we make will show what sort of people we are. I had something precise in mind. In this half-century we have been forced to see that we cannot take civilisation, or freedom, for granted. A free society is a great achievement. But it is also a difficult thing, and fragile. To keep it, you have to work away at it all the time. Our kind of free society is a total democracy. By our choice we shall show whether
we can carry its responsibilities or whether it is going to be too difficult for us. Here we confront yet another of our problems, the change we have made in ourselves. For total democracy is a new thing. In the United Kingdom it is the child of the twentieth century. To my mind it is still in the experimental stage.

Total democracy is democracy carried to its limit. In the United Kingdom it means that all men and women of twenty-one years of age and over have the vote. It has been natural, and perhaps inevitable, that the first effect of all having the vote has been to focus interest on the distribution of wealth. It has increasingly become the centre of controversy between the political parties. It has led to nonsense about the problems of production being solved while those of distribution were still to be worked out. The general effect has been to emphasise political division. And this has been further stressed by the power of the great party machines developed to get the mass vote out, the narrow margins of victory at general elections, the importance attached to party loyalty.

This emphasis is a weakness, for our kind of political democracy depends as much on the recognition of unity as on the fact of division. The recognition of a common responsibility for the interests of the whole community, the acknowledgement that there are national issues which should be debated and settled outside of party, the self-discipline in controversy entailed by these beliefs—these maintain the unity of a free society which alone makes party disputes healthy and constructive. They are our safeguard against civil strife, against the emergence of force as the arbiter of disputes.

I feel sure that if I were regularly present when the House of Commons is sitting, I should often feel that the quality of the debate was near that of a Council of State, with party advantage forgotten for the moment. But I am not—like nearly all of us. From the outside I catch more easily and more regularly the echo of disciplined feet marching into the lobbies, division after division. On the great questions of national importance which are outside party, we, the mass electorate, do not hear enough from our leaders. We need to be better informed, on foreign affairs, on economic matters, about what falls within our common responsibility for the general interest. How else can we give that measure of intelligent support to the Government without which democracy grows weak?

There is a risk of too wide a gap developing between those who govern us and us who are governed. The gap grows naturally: it is closing it which takes thought and effort. We have to spend most of our time looking after our own affairs and taking an interest in the churches, groups, or clubs to which we belong. It is not easy to rise suddenly to a national point of view and look at the problems of Britain, overseas and at home, as responsible citizens. But those who govern us spend their working days on these problems. Their job is to take account of the changed world in which we live. They are accustomed to the complexities of our relations with our friends. Their outlook, their approach to the problems, the methods they use differ from our habits of thought.

It is at this point that some people take refuge in the notion of strong leadership. I should be the last to deny the need for the Government to lead or its duty to do so. But the mystique of leadership does not fit in with our kind of democracy. Nothing can take the responsibilities of the citizens from them. Surely in Britain leadership is a
complex and delicate art, and successful leadership depends as much on the enlightened support of the led as on the inspiration of the leader. If, therefore, we are to narrow the gap between those who govern us and ourselves, we shall need help from our leaders and we shall also have to help ourselves. But as we succeed and prove we can carry our responsibilities, we shall at the same time see more clearly and, I believe, choose rightly about the future of Britain. The moral issue with which I began and the operation of total democracy come together. Our governments will be able to carry through the broad policies we must adopt only if we understand and support them.

**Response of the Many**

I shall be told that this is not realistic. If seeing clearly and choosing rightly about the broad future of Britain is to be the function of the general body of voters, then it will never happen. It implies an idealised, a perfectionist view of human nature. And if you expect too much from human beings, you end by getting nothing. It is no good making everything depend on the response of the many. I disagree. And this is the heart of the matter. Our political tradition is built on the ability and willingness of the voting citizen to be interested in the general question of the community and take some individual responsibility for their solution. We presuppose a sufficient degree of unity and common purpose to be able to settle our affairs in debate. We have faith in reason as the chief weapon of democracy, not believing for one moment that we are purely rational beings but holding that reason can regulate our other activities and prevent a resort to force.

These are built-in presuppositions of British society. They were at work in the decision to make education universal in 1870. They helped to lay the foundations of a general secondary education in 1902. We were sure that the spark of reason was alive in everyone and could be brought out and developed. Total democracy is the test of our political faith. It is far harder to get understanding of the broad problems of the nation widely spread through the mass electorate than it was with the minority electorates of the last century. True, but this is the only direction of advance. It is implied by all we have done. After all, the price of keeping our free society is more than eternal vigilance: it is going on working at it.

I want to illustrate the sort of thing we can do. There are fields where I think we must first be helped by our rulers: there are others where we can do a good deal to help ourselves. As an example of the first, I take foreign affairs, both political and economic. We should gain a good deal if our leaders were rather less cautious in approaching the whole body of citizens, if they were more experimentally minded. This is the age of radio and television. And the old tag is true: seeing is believing. The power of television is great and will be used. They could put it to good use. What I observed in the United States makes me sure of this, as it also impressed on me the importance of mastering these new techniques of mass communication with the citizens in their homes.

**Making the Nation snore Effective**

If our leaders would stimulate general discussion in the nation more often, outside the lines of party, on some of the broad attitudes we should adopt to the changed world,
the nation would be more effective. And later, when they came to particular decisions, they would enjoy stronger and more understanding support and run less risk that sudden popular emotion would frustrate their efforts. Experiments like this would not infringe on the rights and privileges of parliament. What the citizen needs is to be helped to think out the general background of policy, the long-term assessments of the situation which lie behind the actual conduct of affairs.

There are difficulties. One springs from the progress of general education in Britain over the last eighty years. For education both builds and destroys. It is destructive of established authority and traditional opinion. The authority it recognises and respects is that of experience, of the man on the job, the man with active responsibility. These have the right to be heard and believed. In our political system Ministers of the Crown and their advisers, members of the Foreign and the Civil Service, alone in their different ways have the authority of direct experience. They are the people who are on the job.

The Ministers of the Crown most closely concerned with these matters in any Government are the Foreign Secretary and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I have worked with more than one Foreign Secretary and more than one Chancellor of the Exchequer. I know how hard driven they are. There is little time or energy to spare after the proper demands of parliament, of their departments, and of conferences overseas. They can hardly add to their duties. The question—and it is a big question—is whether the priorities are right. I am suggesting the case for revision.

Then there are Foreign Servants and Civil Servants. It is our pride that the public service is outside party politics and serves whichever party is in power. But members of the Foreign Service, when posted abroad, frequently find themselves snaking speeches and leading discussions on foreign affairs. And at home I have noticed in recent years that senior members of the Civil Service have had rather more freedom to talk in public on the background of their work. And at home I have noticed in recent years that senior members of the Civil Service have had rather more freedom to talk in public on the background of their work. I suggest that, if a wider knowledge of the background and general direction of foreign policy is urgently required among us all, there is room for a variety of experiments in closing the gap between us and them. This need not conflict with any essential principle. For myself, I am more worried by the risks of trying to guide twentieth-century democracy by nineteenth-century methods.

I was interested, when in the United States, to watch an experiment the State Department was making. In 1951, for instance, officials of the Department went out into the forty-eight States of the Union and made nearly 2,500 speeches. Meetings were held in the State Department, at the rate of one a week, to explain to various groups and organisations the broad aims of American policy. Beyond that, there were regional conferences at which the heads of national organisations discussed foreign policy with members of the Department. I know that one can never successfully transplant an American practice into the British scene, any more than one can do the reverse. But the problems of the mass electorate face the Americans in their continent as they face us in our islands. We can afford to view such experiments with indifference only when we know we have better answers ourselves.

My second example comes from the field of economic affairs. Our Governments since the war have repeatedly appealed to us for restraint about wages and wisdom in
the use of profits. I must admit that for a time I thought this advice sensible rather than profound. But now I believe the point to be of a different order. Our Governments, it seems to me, have become aware of a new working principle in our democracy. They have insisted on it because, unless we see it too and act accordingly, our free society is endangered. But to think through and apply a new working principle in the life of the community is a major matter. It continues to be the business of us all because it is a question of our general attitude to life and work.

Let me explain what I am driving at. You know how the political parties are agreed that the state should aim at maintaining a high and stable level of employment. You know, too, that experience since the war suggests this aim can be achieved. High employment and the steady growth of production have enabled us to make great advances. These advances have brought other things with them. Almost anyone can find work. Profits are good, because demand is kept high enough to absorb what is produced. Again, labour shortage and good profits together reduce resistance to wage increases.

Wage increases which come from greater efficiency of production are very good things. But when they do not, and the increase is passed on in higher prices, it does little good to those who get more and harm to those who do not. What is more, if this happens regularly, it whittles away the value of money. And if inflation gets out of hand, the danger is great. The line of argument is familiar, but the dangers are real. It is not an accident that there is a general round of wage increases nearly every year, nor that the cost of living has more or less kept pace with the movement of wage rates. With steady high employment, both employers and workers may become less conscious of the need for efficiency. A nation of manufacturers and traders, we may not increase our efficiency fast enough to compete and win in world markets.

How do we keep the great advantage of high employment and avoid these dangers? It is here that the new working principle comes in. To succeed, we have to practise what our Governments preach, cultivate restraint, and exert a real self-discipline. It is not something we can do once for all: as with the other requisites of freedom, we have to keep on at it all the time. After all, the agreed policy of high employment goes a long way to guarantee the interests of both employers and workers. It is no longer enough for them simply to drive hard bargains with each other: they have their common responsibility for the public interest. Where restrictive practices exist on either side of industry, developed in the days when unemployment was widespread and competition really cut-throat, it is time for them to go.

**Intelligent Self discipline**
This issue I am discussing cannot arise in a communist country. If managers are not efficient or workers do not work, they disappear into concentration camps. In a free country with heavy unemployment, the hard discipline of the competitive struggle keeps everyone up to the mark. In our free society, our total democracy, we have chosen freedom both from the compulsion of the state and from the compulsion of want. But the law of the survival of the fittest is always there. We can survive and succeed only if we substitute something positive, the intelligent self-discipline of free men. This is difficult. The democracy we practise is a difficult and demanding way of
life. But what is at stake is the future of our society, and at the same time our willingness to grasp our opportunity and be effective in the world.

One of the things which struck my imagination when I lived in the United States was the American attitude to efficient production and technological advance. Americans were fascinated by the scientific technique of continuous discovery. They regarded an idea as old, a technological advance as obsolete, a new product as obsolescent the very moment the idea had been exploited, the improvement carried out, the product made. This is one of the secrets of the American way of life. They feel that perpetual innovation, this ever-repeated assertion of man’s power over nature, has an absolute value. They know that in the expanding economy of the United States these activities have paced the development of their country and transformed their standard of living. But there is more to it than that. These activities are a triumphant assertion of the spirit of man.

Most of us do not feel like this. Our traditions are different. We recognise the high place of pure science. For centuries men have found enduring satisfaction in exploring the mysteries of nature. But applied science, engineering, the process of industry—no, these are not on the same footing most useful, no doubt, but not inherently distinguished. Indeed we are apt to think that most of the valuable things in life are outside the factory or office. Men really live in their leisure. Work has a subordinate excellence. It should be done well because it is necessary.

Perhaps, but we have to live in the same world with the Americans and compete with them. We have to find an extra bit of purpose and zest over and above the regular motives of daily life. Most people work better if they believe that what they do matters and makes a contribution to their community. If we saw clearly how directly the greatness of Britain depends on our productive efficiency, we should find that extra bit of drive. For making our industries adaptable and flexible is not just the problem of employers and workers. We are all of us involved, for in the end success or failure flows from the climate of opinion, the scale of values of us all.

Take one example. Think of the problem of power, a large part of productive ‘efficiency. Our workers have at their elbow about one third of the power at the disposal of American workers. We must have more, and it cannot all come from coal. This means developing the industrial uses of nuclear energy and pressing forward fast. And we are well placed. Britain has more than her share of inventive genius: we have a start of ten years over most other countries, except the United States and Russia; and we have an industry big enough to tackle the job. The programme calls for a large and increasing diversion of resources from the immediate comfort and convenience of living. Are we, the voting citizens, ready to choose, and forgo what we would like now, to make sure of the future of Britain?

Or take another illustration, just one of many, the question of working two-day shifts. This is becoming increasingly important in sections of the engineering industry. In order to compete, firms find they must install more complex and costly machinery. But often, if our prices are to be competitive with American prices, the new equipment must be used for more than eight hours a day. You might think this was essentially a specialised matter for industry, for managements and workers. I think not. It is just as much the problem of the whole community. You can see that this
must be so. For the different times of starting and stopping work with two shifts a day mean alternations in the whole framework of life. Buses and trains have to run at different times. Shops and restaurants have to alter their hours. Radio and television, the other interests of leisure, have to change their programmes. So it is our problem, too. Are we willing to put ourselves about for the sake of efficiency in industry? We have to choose.

When I began this lecture, I spoke of the opportunity of Britain and the contribution we might make to the settlement of the great problems of the world. I have just been talking of working two shifts a day, shopping hours and bus timetables. I think you may feel this an anticlimax. But is it? It follows the pattern of life. No vision was ever realised except in the humdrum daily round. No hopes ever came true except in the life of every day. The choice for Britain must be made and the job carried out in ordinary life and work. In our free society the vision, the choice and the work are for all. None of us can leave it to others. This is the privilege of freedom, and the enduring responsibility we carry. Britain will continue a Great Power; she will be a leader among the nations and take her part in the great decisions; she will have the economic strength to sustain her role—if we make it our daily business. It is there that we become masters of our fate. Action begins in the workaday world, if we will to be great.