

THE PLIGHT OF THE CONSERVATIVE IN PUBLIC DISCUSSION

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THE plight of the conservative in American public life is a fact which hardly needs documentation. An analysis of this plight was presented in a recent issue of *The Chicago Daily News* in which opinions from grass-root voters to political and educational leaders were reported. Says the *News*: 'Whether it was called a "welfare state," "creeping socialism," "fascism," "a regimented state," or something else, it boiled down to a belief that individual freedom and initiative are being threatened by the government.' When queried by the *News*, Franklyn B. Snyder, President-Emeritus of Northwestern University, added this: 'Complacency today is the greatest foe of the conservative.'

I think this hits the nail on the head. Complacency it is! And this complacency affects public discussion in America in ways which are good for no one, least of all the conservatives.

I have the temerity to argue that the conservatives in America have become inarticulate to a point where their voice does not do credit to their ideas and often does their cause a positive disservice. I think my analysis is not a partisan one. I confess to a conservative bias, but my concern here is a professional interest in public discussion and debate. In a very real sense, discussion is the essence of the democratic process. Whatever weakens discussion in America, weakens America. A monolithic society is not conducive to vigorous discussion of pub-

lic questions. We need differing points of view, and we need articulate spokesmen for these points of view.

For the past eight years, I have had charge of the Northwestern University Reviewing Stand, a national radio forum originating in Radio Station WGN, Chicago, and carried by the Mutual Network. We are on the air each week with discussions of contemporary problems, mainly social, economic, and political questions. Our speakers are members of the University faculty and distinguished guests from business, industry, labor, government, and the press. As moderator of these discussions, I receive an amazing volume of letters and comments from all over America. One of the most persistent criticisms is the charge that we are radicals, reds, and even communists. To be sure, we are often labeled radicals and reactionaries on the same program, but the charge of radicalism far outruns any other single criticism.

Why this persistent charge of radicalism? I am sure the answer does not lie in the sponsorship and management of our radio forum. Even our critics express surprise that we should be the ones to commit this indiscretion. What is more, precisely the same charge is directed against the other leading radio forums. The answer must be sought in the discussions themselves.

In the first place, we usually discuss changes in the status quo—questions of public policy. That is an important function of discussion. All kinds of social, economic, and political changes are analyzed in the interest of better under-

This is the presidential address at the SAA Convention in Chicago in December 1949. Mr. McBurney (Ph.D., Michigan, 1935) is Dean of the School of Speech at Northwestern University.

standing. The conservative, by definition, opposes change; he supports the status quo; he usually takes 'the traditional position.' The very fact that discussion concerns itself with change may suggest that discussion supports such change. Actually, of course, it does not. Properly conceived, discussion is a method for analyzing problems and considering solutions to these problems. It is not even a good vehicle for propaganda.

More important are the persons who take part in these programs. In organizing discussions of controversial questions, we naturally try to secure the most competent spokesmen available for all points of view. We have little trouble getting the advocates of change, the liberals, the radicals. These people invariably accept our invitations with pleasure and alacrity; but not so with the gentlemen on the right, the representatives of business and industry, the conservatives. More often than not, they are too busy, have other commitments, or refuse to appear on the same platform with other speakers we have invited. Sometimes they say quite frankly that they are afraid of give-and-take discussion.

As moderator of these discussions, I frequently find myself wanting to come to the aid of the conservative spokesmen. Often they are nervous and inarticulate. Especially is this true when their basic assumptions are challenged. They lack facility in verbal analysis and synthesis, in give-and-take argument, in rebuttal and refutation. More often than not they are no match for rhetorically seasoned liberals, with long experience on every kind of platform from a cracker barrel to a radio microphone. There are notable exceptions, but my description is faithful to the rule.

I think this is the reason why our radio forum is charged with radicalism—the conservative spokesmen do not

come through! It is either this or the less charitable explanation that the conservative position in America today is not tenable in public discussion. Whether or not the conservative position, or any other position, is tenable is precisely what public discussion is designed to test. Given spokesmen of high competence and reasonably equal competence, it provides one of the best tests democracy has been able to devise. Unless these conditions are met, we run the risk of serious distortions in public policy.

If this problem were confined to radio forums, I would not take your time with it. It most emphatically is not so confined. These forums are just a small sample of the kind of discussion that goes on all over America—in homes, schools, churches, places of business, legislative assemblies, and deliberative bodies of all kinds. In this larger arena, we can witness the full measure of the rhetorical bankruptcy of the conservative.

For many years past in America, the conservative has been in the saddle. The industrialist, the banker, the business man have been the backbone of America—respected, accepted, and looked to for leadership. Whether this reputation was deserved is neither here nor there. It is a fact. But this long, unchallenged tenure has not been an unmixed blessing. The conservative grew soft under it. He came to take his position for granted. He became complacent. And he lost his voice, except for occasional ceremonial chants and cries of distress. In the meantime, the little fellow on the outside grew in strength and lung power, until one day there appeared on the scene a great spokesman for the ill fed, the ill housed, and the ill clothed. Since that time we have lived under New Deals and Fair Deals.

How have the conservatives responded

to this rude unseating? Not too well, I fear. The National Association of Manufacturers invited a number of students to attend their annual convention in New York this month. *Time* reports some of the reactions of these young observers:

Too many of the NAMsters, the students felt, talked in such platitudes and generalities about the drift towards Socialism, the welfare state, taxes, that what they had to say lost its effect. What was needed, said one student, was a clear, fresh exposition "to the man in the street in terms of the simple why and wherefore of the price of his bread."

A further student criticism was that, in panel discussions, the NAMsters "were often unqualified to answer our questions."

One student put his finger on N.A.M.'s biggest trouble: its failure to capitalize on opportunities to catch the public's ear.

Quite obviously the answer to this problem is not a simple one. Indeed, there may be no answer which the conservatives will like. Whether or not an intransigent liberalism is good for America must be ground out in countless discussions and debates all over America. My hope is that the conservatives will find the means of developing an effective voice in these discussions and debates. I think they are lost unless they do. And I think America stands to lose without their best counsel. I would say exactly the same of the liberals were the situation reversed.

I realize that this thesis comes easily from a teacher of discussion and debate and a moderator of public forums. Some will say the plight of the conservative is dictated by economic, social, and cultural realities in the American scene which have little or nothing to do with 'talk' about these realities. I do not propose to assess these realities in this paper, but I do profess to know something about the influence of talk in building attitudes and shaping events. Talk influences men, and men influence events.

The case for making good sense and good taste articulate is a familiar one to most teachers of speech. We have substantial experimental data to support this thesis.

In the first place, we know that attitudes toward social problems do change significantly as a result of discussion. In other words, something is accomplished in discussion; people do change their positions on public questions as a result of listening to discussions and participating in them. Secondly, we know that the initial or pre-discussion dispersion of attitudes is significantly reduced as a result of discussion. People get closer together. There is a significant tendency toward consensus. Thirdly, we know that people develop superior attitudes toward public questions through discussion, as measured by the opinions of experts. In other words, discussion has the effect of developing sound positions on social questions. Finally, we know the greatest influence in discussion is exerted by the more competent people, as measured by standard tests of personal competence, such as personality inventories, intelligence tests, social maturity scales, and the like.

I cite these data to make the point that public discussion is a democratic tool which no segment of American society interested in social attitudes can afford to neglect; and by the same token, it is a matter of great importance to American society that all social groups be competently represented in public discussion.

Several suggestions for developing effective spokesmen in deliberative councils are implicit in what I have already said. I should like to spell these out in greater detail.

In the first place, men in executive positions in business and industry must be willing to participate in public dis-

cussion. As the President of the United States Rubber Company put it last June:

The Eleventh Hour is here for business to speak for itself. Now, and from now on, the men who run American business must devote as much—if not more—time and effort to the public relations of their business as they spend on finance, production, and distribution. Unless they do, they will not need to worry about the latter problems. Government will be glad to handle them all.

In the second place, the paid spokesmen of the conservatives, the public relations officers of business and industry, must be selected with careful attention to their qualifications for serious intellectual discussion and vigorous public debate. The main job of such officers is developing relations with the public rather than with their brothers in the bond. This requires social, political, and economic literacy of a high order and top-notch dialectical ability.

Thirdly, the conservatives urgently need to develop greater sensitivity to the changing pattern of communication in America. This pattern is characterized by a growing emphasis on logical values in place of high pressure mumbo-jumbo; by simple, direct statement rather than verbal obfuscation; and by a sense of relativity in language usage in place of arbitrary, dogmatic assertion. These changes are inevitable in a democratic society which is becoming more conscious of the processes of communication and more sophisticated in their use. Any speaker ignores them at his own peril.

Fourthly, the conservatives must rid themselves of some unfortunate stereotypes. In this so-called 'era of the common man,' the conservative is depicted as the foe of the common man. Unfortunately, this role can easily be given specious plausibility because the conservative does have vested interests in the status quo. In a society in which men are living longer and specialized

economic functions tend to draw class lines, it is easy to think of the conservative as an old man who has lost the common touch. Actually, the interests of the common man on any given issue at any given time and place may be just as completely identified with the conservatives as with the liberals. Most certainly it begs the question to assume otherwise. The lines between conservatives and liberals in America need not, and should not, be drawn on the basis of age or class. They should be determined in free and widespread discussion, and the conservatives must learn how to conduct themselves in such discussions in ways which will enlist the sympathy and understanding of common men.

The conservatives have also succeeded in alienating many of the intellectuals in America. Witch hunts in the colleges and universities, journalistic caricatures of the mortar board, and frantic name calling are hardly designed to win the understanding of men who place a high premium on objectivity in discourse. Moreover, there are echelons in the intellectual hierarchy in which there are fashions in ideas just as there are in goods. In some of these quarters, I fear, the conservative position has lost caste for reasons which have very little or nothing to do with its merit.

A minimum program of education and training for the kind of public discussion I am talking about should include: 1. A broad understanding of social, political, and economic issues in American life and culture; 2. clear insight into personal and social values as they affect these issues; and 3. specific training in the philosophy and method of democratic participation.

On this last point may I add with some feeling that such training is not to be secured in classes in after-dinner speaking and polite elocution. What is

needed is sound education in discussion, debate, persuasion, and semantics under conditions which provide opportunities for realistic experiences in participation and leadership under the direction of competent teachers.

In conclusion, I wish again to make it clear that I do not present this analysis to plead the cause of the conservative, nor do I mean to question the ability and integrity of the conservative. It is my purpose rather to point out that conservatives generally are not doing their cause justice in public discussion

and debate, explain why this is the case, and suggest some of the ways in which this weakness can be corrected. I believe this to be a problem of more than ordinary importance in American public life, and certainly one of great significance to students and teachers of speech.

As Aristotle put it, over two thousand years ago: 'Truth and justice are by nature more powerful than their opposites; when decisions are not made as they should be, the speakers with the right on their side have only themselves to thank for the outcome.'