

MODERNIZING GOVERNMENT

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CERTAIN liberal thinkers about social questions seem animated by a pathetic faith in the possibility of renovating our system of government by electing the "right" men to office. They seem to overlook the point that there may be something so fundamentally wrong with this system of government itself that it can not successfully be adapted to the new, complex, mechanistic age in which we live. Thus, for example, it is quite true that the application of intelligence and foresight to the problem actually can make our obsolete county system work efficiently and well in isolated instances, but it is an open question whether we should retain this obsolete and old-fashioned portion of our system of government in view of the fact that only an unusual and extraordinary combination of intelligence and ethics in public office can enable it to function efficiently.

As a matter of fact we do not live under a functional government. Nor have we yet evolved an intelligent functional society. In his *Acquisitive Society*, R. H. Tawney thus defines functional society:

A society which aimed at making the acquisition of wealth contingent upon the discharge of social obligations; which sought to proportion remuneration to service and denied it to those by whom no service was performed, which inquired first not what men possess but what they can make or create or achieve, might be called a Functional Society, because in such a society the main subject of social emphasis would be the performance of social functions.

Such a society would have a functional government designed to serve the needs of the people. Our society could scarcely be more antithetical to this ideology than it is at present.

In our society the acquisition of wealth is usually contingent upon the discharge of antisocial duties. Remuneration is proportioned to greed and to shrewdness, not to service performed. A Faraday could live in our society and, if he adhered strictly to pure research, attain no more than the salary fit for the valet of a lord. Our banks do not loan money upon the potential ability of individuals to create or achieve, but upon tangible securities and real estate offered as collateral—in short, upon what men possess. The social emphasis in our society is not upon the performance of

social functions, but upon the acquisition of wealth and the legal protection of those who acquire wealth, regardless of their deviously ethical procedures in such acquisition. Furthermore, no purely acquisitive society living under the aegis of individualistic profit economy possesses a functional government; it quite naturally possesses a political government designed purely to serve the interests of the acquisitive. Hence it is pathetically naïve to presume that the injection of a few intelligent liberals into the machinery of such government could possibly serve any good purpose by and large.

Again, the day of native intelligence is past. It would be quite impossible today for a Socrates to govern this nation wisely unless he used his broad, profound, general intelligence for the purpose of synthesizing larger truths from the facts and smaller truths which would be brought to his attention by those experts in specialized knowledge whom we call scientists. However, if Socrates were elected President of the United States by means of the average political methods, he would find himself so impeded by politicians in his efforts to draw correct and logical conclusions from the facts offered to him by scientists that his hands would be tied completely. It thus becomes apparent that we have gone headlong, willy nilly, into an age of science while obstinately retaining a form of government so desperately archaic that it is quite unwilling to use the verifiable knowledge already accumulated, which knowledge a functional society would put into practical operation as rapidly as it accumulated.

In spite of these facts there have surreptitiously crept into the government service certain functional units. One of these that might be cited as an instance is the Food and Drug Administration which has recently been organized upon modern, scientific principles to effect the enforcement of the food and drug law. This unit originally came into being as the result of a vision on the part of Dr. Harvey W. Wiley. Precisely why a thinker so easily confused and of such relatively narrow vision should have had this ideal baffles complete explanation. Perhaps it takes a fanatic with a fanatic's zeal and overemphasis to badger the Congress of the United States into passing legislation functionally beneficial to the public at large. Certainly Dr. Wiley's administrative technique was no match for his fanatic zeal and ultimate reorganization was inevitable.

The Food and Drug Administration of today is a strangely

economical unit of government which, at a cost of about one cent per caput, perhaps offers the American public a greater return for its money than any other investment it makes in taxation. This does not mean that its administration is perfect. When one considers the wide variety of food and drug products in import or interstate commerce which constantly demand the attention of its five hundred and thirty employees one can readily understand that imperfections must exist. The point is that by very intelligent organization this unit accomplishes miracles on a pitifully small appropriation, and if the public desires better protection from fraud it should pay the piper. The policy of the Administration is squarely in line with the best modern economic and sociological theory and even with advanced criminal practice. It is educational and corrective rather than punitive in its operations, and, by acting sincerely upon these principles, it has not only reduced violations to a minimum but has built up valuable coöperative good-will among the cut-throat competitors whose business it is called upon to regulate.

This policy, opposed as it was to Dr. Wiley's more traditional notions of criminal justice—his idea being that when you see a head take a rap at it and judge the vigilance of the bureau by the convictions secured—naturally brought down his wrath upon the operations of an organization which he no longer understood. He therefore delivered himself of ill-founded attacks which, by reason of his earlier prestige, made the work of the unit more difficult. In addition it had, and has constantly, to stand the continued and unceasing assaults of a large section of the drug and patent medicine trade. Engaged as they are in an essentially unethical traffic in superfluous quackeries, these business firms find it to their advantage continually to misinterpret and contort the decisions of the Administration, and to impede its efforts in every possible way.

Basically this government unit is engaged in the strangely communistic work of making the known facts of science of immediate value to the American consumer. Backed by the results of painstaking laboratory research, the staff of the Food and Drug Administration seeks to protect the health and the pocketbook of every Tom, Dick, and Harry of us. In doing so, it will be observed, it serves no particular group. It is not seeking to make more profit for dairymen or animal husbandmen; it does not undertake to develop practices which will enable business and manufacturing con-

cerns to increase dividends by standardizing their products; it is not stocking streams with fish nor is it showing orchardists how to realize more money on their fruits. It lies directly across the current of devil-take-the-hindmost business practices and says: "That you can not do because it defrauds the general public or injures the health of the consumer; whether you make money or are driven into bankruptcy you can not continue that practice."

The result is inevitable as has been made apparent by a Senatorial investigation during 1930. In this particular instance a commercial broker of almost infinite persistence, who had a marked talent for prevarication which bordered on absolute genius, aided and abetted by four scientific men who either did not know what they were talking about, or else did not care, so befuddled the liberal intellectual editors of certain newspapers and magazines that investigation was called for with loud screams. The most prominent advocate of such investigation happened to be a leading liberal Senator whose native intelligence, unassisted, proved quite incapable of coping adequately with the problem presented. The problem itself was technical and scientific; it was intricate in the extreme and extended to the more obstruse reaches of obstetric practice, pharmacology, and pharmaceutical chemistry. Certain members of the Senate who happened to have had scientific training—as well as Senator McNary, Chairman of the Committee undertaking the investigation, who seems blessed with a sharp and very keen intelligence—began to understand the problem, realized they had to do simply with a base, commercial onslaught upon the disinterested scientific work of a functional government unit, and absolved what is probably as honest, sincere, and competent a group of officials as can be found in the government today. Those interested in details which cannot be presented here may consult the *Journal of the American Medical Association* for September 6, 1930, wherein will be found the story in full.

Our interest here is in the broader social and economic implications of the affair. Here we have a functional unit of government putting scientific knowledge disinterestedly to practical use for the benefit of the public. It deals necessarily with complex chemical and pharmaceutical problems. It not only performs research constantly, but it continually checks its decision against the laboratory work of specialists of sorts. It does not show anybody how to make money, but it does prevent certain corporations and individ-

uals from making money by fraudulent means. It is, therefore, bound to be attacked with the utmost vigor and viciousness. In such attacks it is the easiest thing in the world for a clever man so to misconstrue technical matters that the naïve intelligent liberal can become completely confused, and scent incompetence and treachery where these do not exist. Even with the best intentions in the world it is almost impossible for such liberals to comprehend the truth, so deficient are they in the most rudimentary knowledge of scientific method and the value of scientific evidence.

Add to this situation the curious ethical deflection of three or four scientists of standing, one of whom seemed commercially interested in the plot, and whose real reputation was made in a field collateral with, yet distinctly separated from, medicine, and you get the liberal intellectual still worse confused. In spite of the fact that two of these scientists withdrew from the fray and all but retracted what they had first said, the initial impression created was all to the bad. Ultimately the naïve, liberal intellectual feels quite certain that he must have been hornswoggled because he was all indignant, wasn't he, and there must surely have been something to be indignant about? Finally, there is also the somewhat pathetic squirming of the honest, sincere, and intelligent men under investigation, for they did not seem to realize fully that the very lay of the entire situation so placed them, that their work would be much more often maliciously and untruthfully attacked than appreciated at full value, and that unnecessarily discouraged them at times. Certainly the ineptitude of native intelligence in coping with such complex problems is quite obvious.

As may be seen by a consultation of Bailey's article in *The American Journal of Sociology* for July, 1930, the pure food law was fought bitterly every time it was brought up in Congress by politicians, who were determined to see that the government performed as few social functions as possible. Some of the most famous Senators resolutely stood out against the bill and did everything in their power to defeat it. They were disingenuous, of course, and usually insisted that certain other bills were so much more important that pure food legislation must yield its place on the calendar. Actually, however, they realized that the passage of the bill would materially interfere with the ill-gotten gains of many of their constituents, and they felt that remuneration should not be denied to those by whom no social service is performed.

Naturally a bureau like Chemistry and Soils, also of the Department of Agriculture, is in a far stronger position in a profit economy. It can tell ignorant commercial cake-bakers to save money by mixing all their batter together at once rather than following the traditional method of creaming the fat and sugar first, and then adding the other contents; for the traditional method actually has no advantages. It can show how millions of dollars worth of hides now spoiled by wasteful handling before they reach the tannery can be saved and sold more profitably. It can discover for the dairyman that lactose may be useful in producing hard candy in order to render it less hygroscopic. It can evolve methods for canning and preserving the culled citrus fruits so long ignorantly wasted by producers; it can show them how to ripen fruit rapidly by ethylene treatments. It can enable another industry to erect more efficient turpentine stills than it ever thought of erecting on its own initiative, and, in a moment of tremendous vision, it can actually close the naphthanthraquinone ring in the preparation of alpha-benzoyl-benzoic acid and thus increase profits on the commercial production of phthalic anhydride.

It is not argued that these services are unimportant or that they should necessarily be discontinued. In a more rationally organized economic society they are precisely the services which should be performed by functional government. The argument is that such services are quite obviously profitable to large financial interests and bring to the bureau concerned a natural increment of affection which is never paid to a governmental unit charged with the duty of preventing fraud for the sake of the individual consumer.

For years no attention has been paid to noise. Recently scientific investigation demonstrated that a reduction from forty-five to thirty-five decibels in the noise regularly surrounding a group of insurance workers improved their output twelve per cent although no other office changes were made. Moving an assembly department of a temperature-regulator from its old place next a boiler shop to a quieter room resulted in a reduction in rejections at inspection of over seventy-five per cent, while the output in the same department increased from eighty to one hundred and ten per cent. A twelve per cent increase in output occurred in another department merely by stopping the noise of a large ventilating fan, while lowering the noise in the telephone operating room of a telegraph company from fifty to thirty-five decibels resulted in a forty-two per

cent reduction in errors made and a three per cent reduction in costs per message. These things are so simple as to be almost obvious but industry has so long been hell-bent for profits that it ignores such technological problems almost entirely.

Standardization had to be suggested and taught to millionaire industrialists by a government bureau. Ways and means of utilizing waste products for profits have constantly to be called to the attention of *laissez-faire* industrialists by the communistic or socialistic government bureaus which make the facts of science freely available. These things are common everyday functions of government today, but they are social and economic, not political functions. It is discovered that one milk-bottling plant breaks two and a half pounds of bottles a day and another of the very same size seventeen pounds. Very simple rearrangements of apparatus and methods of handling bring both breakage figures down to the lower level mentioned. The milk bottler profits and pockets the profits. He does not necessarily reduce the price of his milk. He is, in fact, under no social obligation to do so according to his ethics and the ethics of individualistic competition.

Quite naturally, then, the position of a functional administrative unit of the character of the Food and Drug Administration is anomalous in a profit economy. It violates almost all the set rules of the game. Whatever Dr. Wiley may originally have had in mind, this administrative unit has developed into an organization which insists that package labels mean something; which declares that manufacturers simply can not increase profits by label declarations which are untruthful; which holds that the consumer should not be compelled to pay as much for a substitute, or a synthetic food product, as he does for the real thing unless it be plainly labeled as to weight and nature of contents and he does so of his own free will and after perusing the label. It condemns the widespread magazine and newspaper advertising of certain products in grossly unscientific terms, though a joker in the law forces it to confine its legal attention to container labels and gives it no jurisdiction over advertising distributed separately from the product. It permits the admission of imported food and drug products on a basis of label and quality, and quite regardless of port or country of origin, ownership, or the part a shipment may take in making or breaking a "corner" in some commodity.

An interesting sidelight on the scientific method followed by this

organization appeared recently when it published certain standards for food products. Thus, instead of laying down the law about such a thing as "raisin bread" it initially defined that commodity in the following terms:

Raisin bread is the product, in the form of loaves or smaller units, obtained by baking a leavened and kneaded mixture of flour, water, salt, yeast, and raisins, with or without edible fat or oil, milk or a milk product, sugar and/or other fermentable carbohydrate substance. It may contain diastasic and/or proteolytic ferments, and such minute amounts of unobjectionable salts as serve solely as yeast nutrients. The flour ingredient may include not more than 3 per cent of other edible farinaceous substance. The finished product contains not less than 3 ounces of raisins to the pound.

In view of the fact that liberal thinkers habitually settle world-problems by utilizing vague and undefined terms like "democracy," "social justice," or "social control," this basically scientific procedure is itself worthy of study.

It is for this reason a most uniquely interesting bureau and deserves the serious consideration of students intelligently interested in the proper functioning of non-political government based squarely upon verifiable scientific findings. It, indeed, offers a passing hint to the optimistic liberal intellectual with his enthusiasm for native intelligence. He should inspect this administrative unit, examine its work, explore its methods, seek to understand its functioning, and he would get some idea of the basis upon which government for service would operate. Its contentions with misguided politicians, disappointed brokers, ambitious nature-faking food and drug purveyors, and even at times with political government itself should be a lesson to him. The very enemies it has made recommend it, and it is more of a sign and a portent, perhaps, than either liberal intellectuals or its own administrative officials are aware.