



## Some Thoughts On Britain From Abroad

(47stba)

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DEAR EDITOR,

During the voyage back to India I have inevitably been turning over in my mind the experience of a year at home. Some things seem so clear and compelling to me that I want to say them to you, and to the readers of the News-Letter if you think them worth passing on. When one comes home after seven years away, one sees with an almost painful vividness things which otherwise one would not have noticed because they were so familiar, and one sees things from a point of view which the man on the spot cannot have. And when it comes to leaving again, after all the rich and happy experiences of furlough, one finds afresh how precious are many of the things which one would take for granted if one were not leaving them. That is my excuse for writing as I am going to do now.

The first thing I saw when I landed was a queue. Perhaps it will seem ridiculous to say that it brought a lump into my throat, but I confess that it did. The queue system will not work in India, because it contradicts the fundamental basis of society which is caste. One had become accustomed to the frightful scrums that surrounded booking offices, and to the various methods of by-passing them. To see people quietly and without fuss taking their place behind one another and waiting their turn was a profoundly moving symbol of a different basis of society, of the belief that each one counts for one, and of the discipline that had made that belief part of the unconscious attitude of the ordinary man. Although queues became more familiar as days went by, that impression was not blunted—the impression of an immensely strong and resilient social discipline, rooted in the acceptance of the worth and responsibility of every man.

Many other things went to confirm that impression. I think the most impressive was the way the rationing system worked. In India one saw luxury and starvation side by side all the time. The mass of suffering was so colossal that it numbed the feeling



and paralysed the will. It was like coming into a new moral climate to come into a place where things were being shared equally, where one never saw a hungry child or a starving man, and where one knew that the little bit of extra economy needed in housekeeping was contributing to make that possible. It meant that all the time each one could play a responsible part – however small – in making life decent for all. It meant that economic life – in this part of it at least – was human and moral instead of brutish and meaningless.

Allied with that was the sense of the vitality of free institutions of all kinds. One had become used to the situation of a country governed by bureaucracy from above. It was – again – like breathing new air to find everywhere a multitude of free voluntary organizations, springing from the personal sense of responsibility of their members, and co-operating as free partners with Government. I shall be told that the vitality of these free institutions is declining. I reply that, even if that is so, the vitality that still remains is something to marvel at and to cherish.

Is it fanciful to add here one other impression? Wherever there was space for it, every house seemed to have its garden even if it was only a window-box. I shall never forget the sight of them on the day we landed – mile after mile of them in all the glory of June. I was not prepared for them and they took my breath away. That too – surely – is a witness to something vital, a protest that every man has his own rooting in God's good earth even when the machines have all but made a desert of it; that every man has his own work of art to create, even if his job gives him no chance of doing it.

I will sum up the impression I have tried to convey by saying that it was the impression of a society deeply-rooted in the Christian belief that every man is precious in the sight of God and is responsible before God for his neighbour; a society making an effort of quite revolutionary importance to apply that belief in new ways to the problems of large-scale organization. I know that I am speaking of something which is an inheritance from the past, something built out of centuries of Christian worship, teaching and preaching, and that the inheritance is not being built up as it must be if it is to persist. I know also how terrible



have been the inroads into that inheritance, the destruction of family life represented in the divorce statistics, the loss of purpose represented in the figures of gambling, the many-sided lowering of moral standards in two wars. Nor do I forget the glaring examples, both among wage-earners and among the managerial and owning groups, of unwillingness to put national before private interests.

These things are indeed great evils. But we shall not defeat them if we let them blind us to the resources we still have. I have tried to say – and I know that others in the same position agree with me – that what strikes one most forcibly when one comes home after seven years away is the persistence of the Christian inheritance in spite of all the immensely powerful forces which are seeking to destroy it. That is surely ground for courage as we face the immense new experiment in social organization which is now being made.

That brings me to the crux of what I want to say. What is being attempted in Britain to-day is surely the most important political happening in the whole world. An attempt is being made to create a kind of social and economic organization which will combine the measure of rational control without which modern society must disintegrate into chaos, with the measure of personal freedom without which society cannot remain human. We know, I think, that the two ways of life which so stridently compete for the control of the world – the way of unregulated capitalism and the way of totalitarian communism are both highways to disaster. The way we are trying to follow is the only one which offers hope for the future of our civilization. To the British people has been

granted the high privilege of pioneering a road for this unified but disintegrating world we have inherited. Our only hope of success lies in the strength of our faith as to man's worth and responsibility.

It is because I believe this that I find it hard to understand how people can be so blind to what is going on, so defeatist, so ready to believe the worst about Britain's present and future. Of course blunders have been made and are being made. But in exposing blunders we have surely to remember what is being attempted. No serious person in any political party believes in the removal of all controls and the return to nineteenth-century capitalism. Criticism of controls must surely be within the framework of a

clear understanding of the kind of society we are trying to create, and not an attempt merely to exploit the natural unwillingness of unregenerate man to accept social discipline. Coming from the squalor and hunger and misery of India to the incredibly well-stocked shops, the healthy, well-fed children, the security and solidarity of Britain, it was hard to listen patiently to the continual lament that the country was going to ruin because (it generally appeared) one could not get exactly the kind of stockings or tooth-paste one got before the war. During the year we were at home, fed a good deal better than we had been for seven years in India, we received three parcels of food from unknown friends on the other side of the world. One blushed for shame at the beggarly shouting of our troubles that had brought forth this generosity in a world still so full of people who really know what hunger is.

Perhaps the Christian tradition is not strong enough to bear the new strains we are putting on it. Perhaps it has already been so much weakened by the contempt of Christian worship and teaching that it is incapable of bearing the fruit we look for. Perhaps this experiment is to fail. We do not know. But surely for Christians the situation is – to this extent – clear. We have been given as a nation the chance, bought at a fearful price, to work out a kind of society based on the free acceptance of mutual obligation—the only kind of society holding out any hope of life to the world. We are surely bound to regard it as a very high privilege to have been matched with this hour, to have a share in a struggle that will be decisive not only for Britain but also for the world. Surely this is a time when all Christians can "go to it" with a good courage, understanding themselves and making clear to others the ethical issues at stake, and pointing all men to the only faith which can sustain a society of free and responsible men and women. If ever there was a time when we might rightly count it a high privilege to be British citizens, it is surely now.

Yours sincerely, J. E. L. NEWBIGIN.

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