

On Leaving the Herd

JOHN BRAINE

IN MANY WAYS changing from socialist to conservative makes no difference at all to one's way of living. The general public—or at least that small portion of it which reads my books—is profoundly incurious about authors' politics.

Quite certainly—though I don't care to go into the details of my personal finances—the change hasn't made me any richer. No grateful capitalists have sent me gold cufflinks and boxes of cigars as tokens of their esteem, the doors of Society have not swung open for me. I have been offered no directorships or safe Tory seats. I never seriously expected or desired any of these things; but it's part of socialist mythology that upon those whom they call renegades glittering gifts are invariably heaped.

Almost the exact opposite is the case. The Socialist Establishment is so firmly in control of the mass media, in England as in the United States, that any professional writer who has publicly rejected socialism will almost inevitably suffer for it. I don't repine about this; the intellectual freedom which I now enjoy is so intoxicating that I'm willing to pay any price for it. But when addressing myself to the young I do warn them that the door to advancement isn't the one labeled Right, that if they want the chance of power, riches and prestige, they must take every opportunity to declare their allegiance to the Establishment. To adapt the old saying, he who is not a socialist at twenty has no head.

A recent example from the world of TV will illustrate my point. The commentary of Mr. David Dimbelby upon the official reception of President Nixon at London Airport was markedly disrespectful. The whole event, Mr. Dimbelby implied, was a bore and a waste of time, cunningly engineered by public relations officers; President Nixon wasn't really big enough for his position, he was a President for all seasons,* and so on.

There was a protest from the British

* A phrase now as trendy as *No man is an Island* used to be.

government, and I believe there was some sort of reproof from the BBC. The general consensus, however, was that Mr. Dimbelby had struck a blow for brighter TV and against pretentiousness and pomposity and high level insincerity, that he was, in fact, a bit of a rebel. What no one saw was that Mr. Dimbelby was merely seizing the opportunity to declare his conformity.

For Mr. Dimbelby is a Leftie (and, running true to type, is very rich). And Mr. Nixon, perhaps even more than Governor Wallace or Senator Goldwater, is anathema to the Left. It isn't just that he won and that their man (give or take an item of ideology here and there) lost. Mr. Dimbelby wouldn't have been disrespectful towards President Rockefeller. Mr. Nixon is hated, deeply, virulently, passionately by the Left, English and American, because he was instrumental in exposing the traitor Alger Hiss; because, in short, he committed the supreme offense of serving his country well.

The description of Mr. Nixon as a President for all seasons is truer than Mr. Dimbelby knows; for if St. Thomas More, the originator of the phrase, in his capacity of Lord Chancellor, had discovered a government servant acting as an enemy agent, he would not have had one moment's doubt as to what action to take. This gentlest and kindest of men would personally have conducted the investigation, would personally and without wincing have sent the traitor to a ghastly death. St. Thomas was executed because he would not give to Caesar what was God's; but he never failed to give to Caesar what was Caesar's.

I mention this because there is a very real danger that figures like St. Thomas can be used by the Left. One of the bonuses of not belonging to the Left any longer is that one can see the past more clearly.

What isn't instantly apparent is why the Left hates Mr. Nixon for having done his patriotic duty. It's very easy to say that the Left hates him mainly because the Left is full of Communists and fellow travelers; but why should

someone like Mr. Dimbelby, who is emphatically neither a Communist nor fellow traveler, share this hatred?

The answer is, as James Burnham has once and for all pointed out in his *Suicide of the West*, that the essence of leftism is the absolute conformity to a fixed set of propositions. One of these propositions is that a discredited (even before his death) demagogue called Joe McCarthy was the most evil man since Hitler. It follows from this that anyone who has been actively and effectively anti-Communist is tarred with the same brush.

Mr. Dimbelby is a Leftie and therefore believes this. How do I know he's a Leftie? Because in a broadcast about municipal housing he stated that private house owners buying their houses on mortgage were, by reason of the tax relief given on their repayments, being subsidized by the state.

I WON'T COMMENT UPON this grotesque economic misconception here; what interested me about the broadcast was that, this being one of the Left's articles of faith, I could predict Mr. Dimbelby's opinions about any other subject, from apartheid to aid for underdeveloped countries. This gave me a sense of great power, and in a sense it was an answer to the novelist's prayer—in certain respects one was given a great deal of knowledge about other human beings.

Eventually I have become an expert Leftie-spotter. One sentence, sometimes one word, is sufficient for me to identify a Leftie and forecast his argument. One can receive shocks which momentarily deprive one of the power of speech. Once, for instance, a very well-known Leftie, when I had said that, despite apartheid, I'd rather be a Bantu in South Africa than an Ibo in Nigeria, replied that the atrocities in Nigeria were emotional and unplanned, whereas apartheid was cold and deliberate and inhuman, and therefore not only more immoral but harder to bear.

I remember the sensation of coming into contact with a being of a different species—or perhaps one of the androids of science fiction, human in appearance but all metal and plastic within. I replied that whilst I didn't approve of apartheid, I should more easily bear having to drive a second-hand car, being confined to weak beer for a drink, and having to use restricted lavatories than I should dying slowly on the impalement stake with the corpses of my wife and children around me. But it

took me a full minute to recover my wits; a period of silence which doesn't matter in ordinary conversation but which would have mattered very much on the debating platform or on TV.

What I was suffering from was a sense of isolation. I was sustained when rejecting socialism by the knowledge that my thoughts had become my own, that I was now impelled only by a desire to discover the truth. As a socialist my only concern had been to discover answers which would fit into socialist ideology, irrespective of the facts. Now it was the facts which I had to care about, particularly when these facts related to human suffering.

I SHOULD LIKE to be able to say that now everything is clear to me, that I have all the answers, that there's a right-wing solution for every left-wing solution. The trouble is that more often than not the most one can say is that a course of action exists which will mean less suffering—less suffering, that is, not immediately but eventually. There is little than can be done, for instance, to make life more bearable for the million refugees from North Vietnam now in the South. But if the U.S. pulls out of Vietnam, their suffering will be immeasurably greater.

How bleak this sounds! Intellectually, the Left, in the West at any rate, lives in a skyscraper fortress, sealed off almost hermetically from reality. Its ideology is simultaneously a vast computer with an answer for everything at the touch of a button, and a superbly efficient central heating system. It's warm and cozy in the fortress, and there's plenty of company—two generations of Western intellectuals, in fact. And it's cold and lonely outside, a landscape where, as in C. S. Lewis' fairy story, it's always winter but never Christmas.

But less lonely than it was. And here I must be careful. There are no signs of the hold of the Left over British intellectuals being broken. The Left still has almost complete control of the mass media. It isn't absolutely certain that the Conservative Party will win the next General Election, and if it does it will be because of the Labor Party's deficiencies. And even then the Left Establishment will remain in power.

Having said that, the weekly luncheon at Bertorelli's in Soho remains. It isn't a formal organization with a name

and officers and membership dues, it has no agenda or attendance rules, it organizes no demonstrations or mass meetings. There is no uniformity of opinion among its members—except that they're anti-Left—and politics is far from being the sole topic of conversation. It isn't a secret conspiratorial organization, though it has no desire for publicity either. I should not in fact write about it at all if its existence hadn't been noted in the *New Statesman* with some disapproval. (To be disapproved of by the *New Statesman* is, of course, a kind of honor.) The general implication of the article was that these gatherings boded no good and the intention of those taking part was to improperly influence the course of events.

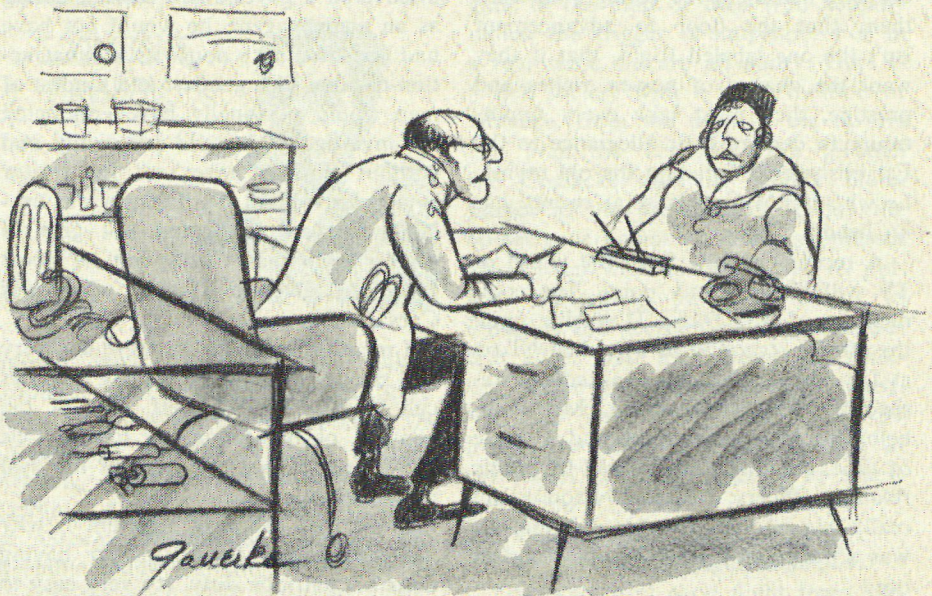
I can't myself go to Bertorelli's as often as I would like, but for some three years now these luncheons have been important to me. A professional novelist necessarily spends most of his working life in solitude. He doesn't need any more solitude. But until I knew of the existence of the Bertorelli group, I had a double dose of it. I was, I hope, strong enough to bear it: but the danger of such a state is that one believes oneself to be the only person in the world who isn't left-wing, that there's a real danger, not only of intellectual arrogance but, close on its heels, a despairing apathy.

From that the company of people better informed, more articulate and more mentally agile than myself saved me. Membership in the local Conservative Party and Monday Club served a

different purpose. They were the army and the regiment. The metaphor isn't strictly accurate, the Monday Club not being officially part of the Conservative Party, but a group of Conservatives sharing a distaste for consensus politics. And yet in the wider sense it is accurate: There is a war on, and there has been since the Russian Revolution of 1917. With reluctance I write the words which have so often been written before: the aim of Communism is world domination. I wish there were a more arresting way to put it; but to try to be clever here would be to run the danger of obscuring the issue. When there is a war on, you don't wait until the armed forces of your country are in your opinion completely efficient. The Conservative Party is fighting the enemy, and that's all that matters.

My dislike of politics has grown with the years. I have been more and more taken over by my job as I have grown older and the job has grown more difficult, not from lack of material but from excess of it. My work would be enough in itself to fill up my entire life; but I have a wife and children, there are people I want to meet, countries I want to visit, there are plays and pictures and books—as I grow older there is abounding more of what I want and less time to enjoy it in. And, keenest of all, there's the pleasure of simply *being*, of quietly moving slowly into the still center. The sterile flurry, the choking dryness of politics isn't an atmosphere in which my spirit flourishes.

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"I'm sending you to a diagnostician, who will determine whether you need a neurologist or a dermatologist."

BRAINE

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But if what can't happen here does happen here, then if indeed I'm allowed to survive at all it will only be at the price of writing the kind of novels of which the regime approves. And the only kind of novel I am able to write is one which tells the truth about the society I live in.

To tell the truth: which is sometimes to celebrate, sometimes to mourn, but never to criticize, never to suggest any radical change. For there can be nothing seriously wrong with a society which permits the truth to be told about itself. I accept this society and will fight to preserve it.

I am not under the illusion that what I think will affect the course of events. I am only certain of this: If I don't think as deeply and clearly as I can about the survival of Western civilization—nothing less is involved—then I shall have betrayed not only myself and my wife and children, but my country.

It isn't very comfortable being a rebel. But never since I changed have I felt that my thoughts were anyone's but my own. Clumsily expressed they may be. Intemperate they may be. But when I speak, I speak as an individual. And that, when I come to think of it, is what the struggle between the Left and the Right is all about. □

DELECTATIONS

(cont. from p. 753)

since the fourteenth century. The Welcome, heightened now and modernized, is a first-class hotel. Villefranche is as good a place as any to spend a holiday but, and it is an important but, it is no longer the home for artists and writers that it was. The old tranquility has gone.

The first sign of change came in the summer of 1932 when blue buses from Nice started to run down into the square and there was no need any longer for the steep climb to the *octroi* to catch the rattling trolley. The blue bus is a godsend to the visitor, yet at the time it was that steep climb and that precipitate descent that gave Villefranche its special cachet. Between 1929 and 1931 I used to sit after breakfast on the Welcome terrace, writing my stories on a round blue table; nothing disturbed me except an occasional dog or a persistent infant. "The big world" made no impact on me. It was different when a large blue caravan drew up be-

side me, reminding me that Nice was only a quarter of an hour away—Nice, and all that went with Nice.

I could list a dozen minor things that have made Villefranche different. The small square behind the Welcome is still called *Place du Marché* but fruit and vegetables are no longer sold there. A road runs all the way along the harbor-side to the beach under the railway line. Where once the long-haired girls sauntered in couples in the evening, the visitors to a stretch of restaurants are now entertained by musicians and performers, in particular by a trick cyclist who has appeared as a background figure in many films. But all those are the minor changes that take place inevitably during forty years. It was the big blue bus that made the essential difference.

Even so the old magic lingers there. And I would suggest that any aspirant for a Ph.D. with a thesis to write on the Twenties should spend three days at least at the Welcome to get its atmosphere and to discover why Cocteau, who was so much a mouthpiece of the Twenties wrote that it was there that he had spent "*le meilleur de ma vie*." □

EWING

(cont. from p. 746)

has now become that of dealing with the limited threat posed by China's potential nuclear forces, a U.S. or a Soviet ABM system would almost certainly induce both super-powers to step up their strategic weapon programs in an effort to ensure their respective "deterrent" capabilities.

The Summary stated in part: "The Committee believes that the control of nuclear armed forces is becoming more difficult with each passing year and that a major effort must be made now to halt the drift toward international anarchy. We believe that the United States, as the most powerful nation in the world, can take the lead in seeking agreements on measures of collective security and of arms limitation and reduction and should do whatever can usefully and safely be done unilaterally as well as jointly. Toward that end we propose a series of steps which taken together would make a systematic and significant beginning to more far-reaching disarmament." Nobly said. Except that there was a slight catch. In 1968 a book was published in Russia, called *Fifty Years of the Armed Forces of the USSR* and written by Marshal M. V. Zakharov, Chief of the Soviet Armed Forces. In it, he states that the

Soviet ABM program got under way in 1958, not 1968: "The creation of ballistic missiles and space vehicles required a modern air-defense system to respond not only against the aircraft threat, but also—and first of all—to provide anti-missile and antispace (specifically, in Russian, anticosmic) defense. . . ."

Item four: It is now 1969. From an "Occasional Paper," February 1969, published by the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, written by Jerome Wiesner:

We always underestimate our own capabilities and overestimate that of the other fellow. I think this is true of both sides, and it generates what I call a parallax effect. That is, if the Russians build a defensive system, we think it is better than it is, so we overbuild in order to penetrate it, and vice versa. Thus there is the real possibility that when everything is stabilized at some higher level and we are all relaxed because we have become used to it, the potential for destruction will have gone up instead of down.

Note that expert Wiesner, Jerome B., wrote, "if the Russians build a defensive system." Sixty-seven ABM sites around Moscow are not "if." They're there.

And what do the Russians, who are spending two to three times as much as we are on strategic military forces, have to say? From *Military Strategy* (third edition, 1968):

In its political and social essence, a new world war will be a decisive armed clash between two opposed world social systems. This war will naturally end in victory for the progressive Communist socio-economic system over the reactionary capitalist socio-economic system which is historically doomed to destruction. The guarantee for such an outcome of the war is the real balance between the political, economic and military forces of the two systems, which has changed in favor of the socialist camp. However, victory in a future war will not come by itself. It must be thoroughly prepared for and assured.

In other words, with experts like Wiesner, who needs enemies? □

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