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## *A Time for Truth*

This is a plea for a new meticulousness and a new respect for fact and truth in those who take upon themselves the responsibility for shaping public opinion.

Words, whether spoken or written, have always been dangerous tools to play with. The book of St. James tells us that "the tongue is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison." But since this was written, the dangers and the poisons have been magnified a millionfold. In the modern world the immense efficiency of the machinery of publicity and propaganda gives to the spoken or written word a power for evil, as well as a power for good, immeasurably greater than it possessed in Biblical times; or even fifty or a hundred years ago, before the advent of the radio and the modern high-speed printing press and the popular mass-circulated daily paper.

Is this great machine being used for good or for evil? Is it being used to bring about a new harmony and understanding between the peoples of the world both within and between nations, or is its effect, on balance, being to confuse counsel and heighten discord? Has the cause of truth been advanced and the world been a happier place since its advent?

It would be hard to give a favourable answer to these questions. In the last thirty years we have seen the enslavement of hundreds of millions of people to rigid political creeds and doctrines in a way that would not have been possible even a few decades ago, and with consequences of the most awful and catastrophic nature to mankind. For the enslavement of men, the radio can be an infinitely more potent instrument than the concentration camp. While the latter can be used to tyrannise over men's bodies, the former can be applied to exercise the greater domination over men's minds and souls.

### THE TOWER OF BABEL

In an article written just after the 1914-1918 war, a great man and a great novelist, John Galsworthy, wrote: "The Palace of Truth has never existed, because it was known to be a silent place. We have preferred the Tower of Babel. None the less does that tower point to the sort of sky that has hung over us these last four years. If we do not want another eight million violent deaths; another eight million maimed and halt and blind; if we do not want Bolshevism and anarchy, let us be sober and painfully try to tell the truth. The whole truth, of course, we cannot tell because we cannot perceive it, but at least we can tell nothing but such truth as we do perceive, having done our best to perceive it."

We did not heed this warning. We continued to prefer the Tower of Babel, which we have in the meantime succeeded in rendering infinitely noisier, with consequences that are becoming every day more disagreeably apparent.

### "COLD WARS"

No one who stops to think could believe that the suspicion and distrust abroad in the world today are confined to the struggle between the democracies of the West and the dictatorships of the East. There are "cold wars," as we well know, going on within the nations themselves, indeed within our own democracy in Australia, as well as "cold wars" between nations. In Australia there are suspicions and discord of not

an insignificant degree; indeed, sufficient to severely hamper progress and at times to cause grave national dislocation and hardship.

It is idle to hope that these suspicions and the hostility to which they give rise can be completely removed. But is it not conceivable that, through a new and more sober approach to the formation of public opinion, and a more responsible use of the organs of publicity by the many leaders of political and industrial groups, the suspicions could be greatly diminished and national progress greatly accelerated with far-reaching benefits to all?

#### ACCURATE INFORMATION

The democratic machine cannot function effectively unless the flow of information that reaches the public, and on which it bases its opinions, is accurate and truthful, and free from distortion and misrepresentation. Accurate, reliable information is at the core of the democratic process. What the people think, governments and business and trade union leaders must eventually do. But what the people think depends largely on what they are told. Democracy demands a sound and sensible public opinion; but how can the public form opinions that are sound and sensible unless the information on which opinion is founded faithfully conveys the truth about the nation's affairs?

In Australia, at the moment, is the modern high-pressure machinery of publicity being used, on balance, to "faithfully convey the truth," or is it being prostituted to the pursuit of narrow sectional ends, regardless and often in contempt of the truth? Is it being used soberly and conscientiously, or recklessly and irresponsibly? Whatever the answer to these questions in the broad, there can be little doubt that in the narrow fields of economics and industry, much of the information which reaches the public is inaccurate or misleading, and the truth not infrequently callously distorted to serve the special ends of special groups.

#### A TERRIFIC RESPONSIBILITY

It is our view that a great part of the prevailing industrial disturbance and unrest could be overcome if a new effort were made to place true facts, truly interpreted, about economic and industrial phenomena at the disposal of the public. Success in this effort would, of course, call for a much more careful and conscientious approach to their task by all those active in the formation of opinion—business and trade union leaders, politicians, journalists, radio broadcasters, economists and statisticians. These leaders of thought carry a terrific responsibility on which they would do well to reflect long and deeply. The great causes of industrial harmony and economic progress would be immeasurably advanced if they were henceforward to display a greater scrupulousness in the application and interpretation of the facts they use to support their arguments.

This is, admittedly, by no means so simple as may at first sight appear. Quite often the mere ascertainment of economic fact and truth raises surpassingly difficult problems. One need only mention the complex technical issues confronting the statistician when he endeavours to measure the bread-and-butter economic phenomena of production, prices and wages. And when the facts have been garnered or measured, there frequently follows the even more difficult task of their true and just interpretation; a task, which, in addition to a fine discriminating judgment, requires a high order of respect for the truth and of moral conscience. It is so easy, and so tempting, to twist the facts, to pervert truth, to support a case we wish to argue.

#### AN EXASPERATING PROCESS

The ascertainment of fact is frequently such an exasperating, tiresome and prolonged process, that in arguing a cause there is an ever-present temptation to use short cuts. Here lies the trouble with much present-day political pleading. It is so easy and so much more pleasant for the writer and speaker to put pen to paper, to stand before the microphone or on the

public rostrum, and state their case without bothering overmuch about the accuracy or adequacy of their supporting data or evidence. We grasp eagerly upon any fact or figure that seems to support the cause we wish to promote, overlooking all the other facts and figures which might suggest that our argument was fallacious or indicate quite a different conclusion to the one reached. Or we use statistics to buttress a case without examining sufficiently the bona fides of the figures, or whether the figures really mean what on the surface they seem to mean. Carelessness is not the peculiar sin of the propagandist or journalist. It is not infrequently seen in high places where the harm which results is often widespread and profound.

## TWO EXAMPLES

To take two examples. In the campaign preceding the last General Elections in Britain claims were made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Stafford Cripps, and the President of the Board of Trade, that British production was greatly in excess of pre-war levels. Sir Stafford Cripps put it at 30%, and the President of the Board of Trade as high as 40%. In an examination of these claims "The Economist" points out that the statistical measures on which they were based cover "industrial" production only, which comprises less than one-half of all national output. The important industries of farming, transport, distribution, public administration and sundry services of various kinds do not come within the compass of the measures used. If it were possible to include this section of "production," then total national output instead of being 30% above pre-war levels, might have been shown to be of the order of 12% (since privately assembled evidence shows a very small increase in output for these sections)—a vastly different result! "The Economist" also points out that the figure of 30% itself depends on the use of certain statistical assumptions, and that, if other assumptions, equally scientific, were made, the increase would be very much smaller, ranging from an upper limit of 24% to a lower limit of 12% (but, in either case, substantially below the increase claimed).

No doubts are of course thrown on the unquestioned integrity of Sir Stafford Cripps or his colleague. The sin is rather one of carelessness and of over-eagerness to support their case before the electors. There was no intention within their minds of wilfully and consciously misleading the electors. But misled they must have been.

The consequences of this kind of thing are obviously immense and far-reaching. For instance, large sections of the public, led astray by these figures, might justly demand increases in wages and salaries in proportion, and far above what the economy could in fact stand. If these demands were met grave harm could be done to the economy and not least to those people who were successful in having them satisfied. If, on the other hand, they were refused, widespread industrial unrest and dislocation of production could eventuate. And even if the grounds from which the demands sprung were shown eventually to be false, the damage would have been done.

Another example, closer to home, can be taken from our own House of Representatives. In his maiden speech, the member for Bendigo (and former President of the A.C.T.U.), Mr. P. J. Clarey, strongly implied that the worker today was not receiving a fair share of the national income and of the benefits of increasing productivity. To substantiate his argument he claimed that the present basic wage of £6/14/0 is in real purchasing power practically no greater than in 1907, when the "Harvester Standard" of 42/- was established, in spite of great advances in production over the intervening 43 years.

Now a little thought will show that the true basis of comparison between the wages paid today and those paid in 1907, is not a comparison between the basic wages at those times, but one between the average wages, including margins, penalty rates, etc., these increments above the basic wages having all greatly increased. Figures published by the Commonwealth Statistician show that *effective* or *real* wages (based on *average* wages) have increased by nearly 40% since 1911.

Now this presents a strikingly different picture to that conveyed in Mr. Clarey's address and one which is much more satisfying from a scientific viewpoint. Quite apart, too, from increases in his wages since 1907, the wage-earner has shared in other ways in the fruits of industrial progress— in shorter working hours, longer paid holidays, paid sick leave, greatly improved social services, child endowment and so on. Though Mr. Clarey referred to these benefits in his address, he made no attempt to assess their influence on the distribution of the national income. But it is, without doubt, considerable, and cannot be so easily dismissed.

Moreover, statistical analysis is in this case reinforced by the exercise of mere common sense. From the point of view of the wage-earner it would be a striking commentary on the ineptitude of the trade union movement (an ineptitude which certainly cannot be attributed to it) if it had failed over the last 43 years to gain any material increase in the real wages of its members.

No one for one moment would question Mr. Clarey's integrity (for which he has established a deserved reputation) or accuse him of wilful misrepresentation. We have no doubt at all that his claims and the arguments supporting them are presented in good faith. But if wrong (and there is in our view little or no question that they are shown to be wrong when subjected to scientific examination) then they could give rise, and possibly are giving rise, to the most serious consequences.

A tremendous responsibility rests on those carrying positions of weight and consequence to be sure of their facts, to weigh their words with meticulous care, and to endeavour to support their arguments only with data of proved and undoubted veracity. One is not entitled to demand perfection in human affairs or in public figures. But one is entitled to demand a sober, conscientious and painstaking approach to great public issues.\*

\* The choice of statements by men prominent in the Labour movement of Britain and Australia to illustrate our argument is by accident and not design. They happen simply to be two examples that come immediately to mind. We have no doubt at all that equally telling examples could be culled from the public statements of prominent people of non-Labour persuasion. No political party and no sectional interest have a monopoly of loose thinking or the distortion and misuse of fact to serve their own particular ends.

Not all errors that creep into the public pronouncements of leading public figures can, however, be put down to sheer carelessness, or be excused as the legitimate exaggeration of political pleading and argument. Statements appear almost every day, of a most blatantly false character, which can only be regarded as intentional. Moreover, even where false statements are made in good faith, they are often due to such a loose and irresponsible use of data that no excuse for their perpetration is possible. A little tolerance and a little licence may be necessary in the give-and-take of political and sectional disputation, but only a little. Let the licence go no further than the point where it commences to become a grave national abuse.

#### THE ERRORS OF THE LAYMAN

Sometimes the errors are clearly those of the inexpert dabbling in fields of inquiry which they are not qualified to comprehend. In that case, it will be a great day for the world when the bootmaker sticks to his last, and the irresponsible propagandist, or even the responsible layman, leaves the interpretation of economic facts to those who possess the specialist qualifications necessary. In major Arbitration cases, any Tom, Dick or Harry is apparently prepared to make the most definite assertions or to offer the most uncompromising opinions on economic movements, the correct measurement and interpretation of which often puzzle the most highly qualified experts. If such statements went no further than the ears of the judges of the Court they might occasion little harm. But frequently they reach the public through publication in the press, and do untold damage to the ultimate cause of peace in industry and to the public understanding of economic and industrial problems.

\* \* \* \*

If the public mind must continue to be bombarded with propaganda on economic and industrial matters—and that apparently is unavoidable under modern conditions where the machinery for the transmission of ideas is so efficient—then,

let the propaganda be infused with a high and conscientious regard for the truth, and the legitimate limits of exaggeration in political argument be not exceeded.

If the game were played fairly, and played only by those with some claims to proficiency, a startling improvement in the atmosphere of industrial relations and in economic policy-making would be possible. In the present uncertain and disturbed state of the world, "the most unsocial act which anyone can commit is to speak or write anything without good reason for believing it the truth. . . . To put forth irresponsible words, because patriotic or party feeling or public sentiment seem to demand them, though it has become a habit, is none the less for that a stone flung at human happiness . . ." The words are John Galsworthy's and they are, today, infinitely more pertinent and significant than when he wrote them thirty years ago.

