REITH LECTURES 1949:
Britain in Europe: Reflections on the Development of a European Society

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Lecture 4: Britain's Contribution to a European Society

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Bertrand Russell said, in the course of one of his Reith Lectures, that 'If loyalty to Britain is to be replaced by loyalty to Western Union, there will need to be consciousness of western culture as something with a unity transcending national boundaries; for apart from this there is only one psychological motive which is adequate for the purpose, and that is the motive of fear of external enemies. But fear is a negative motive, and one which ceases to be operative in the moment of victory.'

Loyalties that Do Not Conflict

I ought to say first that I do not accept all the implications in these sentences. I do not think that it need be taken -for granted that loyalty to Western Union will have to replace that of loyalty to Britain. As I attempted to show in my first lecture, men have various loyalties, and, although a feeling of loyalty both to the Union as a whole and to a particular unit of it may create a great difficulty, it is not an insuperable one. No Englishman wants a Scot or a Welshman to 'replace' his loyalty to Scotland or Wales or feels that this is incompatible with his loyalty to Britain, and, further, our national life would be the poorer if it was thus replaced. While I entirely agree with Bertrand Russell that fear will be an inadequate motive for the formation of a Western Union, I should go further and say that a Union based on fear alone would not be a Union at all, but only an alliance, which is something quite different. It is not only that fear ceases to be operative in the moment of victory. It also proves to be a very unreliable motive before the battle is joined and while it is being fought-a battle which, of course, need not be a physical struggle. For fear, unaccompanied by any more positive motive, may as easily cause a member of an alliance to make terms with the enemy in good time as persuade it to remain faithful to the cause it is pledged to support.

And, further, I feel that there is something dangerous lurking in the phrase, 'a consciousness of western culture'. It might give rise to the view that Western Union can be founded on the culture its members have created in the past, while what always matters in a society is the culture it is creating in the present. But, with that proviso, I certainly agree with Bertrand Russell that Western Europe must have a culture which transcends national boundaries. We have to create, in fact, a European Society, and it is with Britain's contribution towards this that I wish to deal how. But first the phrase, 'a European Society', needs some explanation.

Every state that has ever existed in history for any length of time has only done so because its citizens have felt that it stood for something. This has been true even if its social system has been such that many of its citizens have appeared to play an entirely passive role in it. Unless even these citizens feel ready to accept the way of life offered them by the state to which they belong, that state must be a very weak one and its destruction or absorption into another is inevitable before long. This way of life

may seem to be nothing more than a set of traditional social customs: it may be something much more positive, a belief in some common ideals which bind them together. It may well be almost impossible to distinguish between the two, as the ideals will find their expression in the social customs.

During periods of stability and peace, the citizens may be hardly aware of the fact that their state means anything to them in this way. It is when their state is challenged, and especially when it is challenged by an opposing way of life, that it is found to be absolutely necessary for it to have something to stand for and to know what this is. Clearly it is more difficult for a federation of states to have this confidence that it makes possible a certain way of life. But, unless the citizens of each state believe that the Union stands for something which all hold dear, it will be no more than an alliance and it will be as temporary as alliances always have been.

In a union of several states, at any rate when the states preserve their own strong individualities, this binding force can only be that of common idel1s. Their traditional social customs will doubtless be different and they are not at all likely to be happy adopting each other's. Nor can the, citizens of the union feel for it that hardly explicable love of the very soil of their country, which is a patriotic motive for most of us. George Savile, Marquis of Halifax, writing at the end of the seventeenth century, said of himself, 'For the Earth of England, though perhaps inferior to that of many places abroad, to him there is a divinity in it, and he would rather die than see a spire of English grass trampled down by a foreign trespasser: he, thinketh there are a great many of his mind, for all plants are apt to taste of the soil in which they grow'. In a federation the citizens of one state cannot be expected to feel in this way about the earth or soil of other states in it.

We are forced then to conclude that common ideals are the only possible binding force for a European Union, and we may now consider what this country can do to create them. She can only do so in one way, by expressing them in her own way of life. In Germany I was able to talk with a good many Germans who had visited Britain and to read what others had written of their experiences there. I am conscious that I was only able to study the impact of this country on those of one other, but I did what I could to check my views with people I met from other nations in Western Europe. I have come to the conclusion that there are three qualities in our own way of life which should form our main contribution to the common way of life of the union. All three seem to fulfil real needs in Europe today.

Social Cohesion

The first is the strength of the social cohesion in this country. This is a phrase which naturally demands some definition. No one could suggest that we are socially a wholly united people. Disraeli, in his novel, Sybil, written just over a century ago, said that in England, 'the Privileged and the People form two Nations '. Obviously this is not so marked a characteristic of English life now as it was then. Professor Woodward, writing recently of English social life in 1870, has declared: 'It would be idle to talk of fraternity; Englishmen of different classes were unable to sit at the same table without a sense of patronage or awkwardness'. This is shrewdly expressed and we could hardly deny its truth if written of England today. But, for a nation to have social cohesion, it is not really necessary to be able to sit next to anyone else at the

same table without embarrassment. It means that no section of the community feels itself cut off from all the rest. One section may feel some discomfort if it sits with some other particular section, but it will not feel that there is no one else next to whom it can sit happily. But, while a social cohesion is impossible when classes solidify into castes, it depends essentially on the usual attitudes of individuals towards each other in society. It is created by tolerance and kindness; it is destroyed by bitterness and factiousness. It will always be possible to find examples of men and women who seem to disprove it, but it exists, if at all, as a general atmosphere.

I should like to take one particular instance of the effects on our national life of this social cohesion. I believe that the principle, which we have accepted, of secondary education for all children was based not so much on any theory of equality -as on the strength of our social cohesion. This made us feel, that the community has a duty to fulfil to all its children, to see that they have the education for which they are best fitted. This principle has not yet been accepted in most other countries of Western Europe, but I believe that they are bound to adopt it before so very long. If so, in working it out in practice, we shall be able to give a lead to European education. It will no doubt take us time to find the best ways of doing so, but I might mention one of the various experiments now being made, as it is strictly relevant to the 'subject I am discussing. That is the development of the teaching of modern languages in secondary modern schools. This may well turn out to be one of the best ways in which we are preparing ourselves for membership of a European Union.

The Opposition in a Democracy

To those of other countries our social cohesion seems to be most marked in our political life. There is always a danger that in a democracy politics will destroy or endanger social cohesion, because politics are a sham, and probably corrupt, when people who take part in them do not feel and express strongly their differing points of view. But Britain, more than any other country, seems to have learned the lesson of Lord Haldane's dictum, that parliamentary democracy is only possible when the Opposition meets the Government out at dinner. It was comparatively easy to follow this precept during the last century, when the division between the political parties was essentially a psychological one. To quote once more from the opera, 'Iolanthe' to which I referred in an earlier lecture, that was an age when it seemed that:

Every boy and every gal,
That's born into this world alive,
Is either a little Liberal,
Or else a little Conservative,

and whether they were one or the other, usually depended, not on their social status, but on their temperament. The rise of the Labour Party altered this state of affairs, as it was avowedly one based on a social class. But not only is the distinction creating this class a very hazy one, so that no one can say exactly where it should be drawn, but it is constantly being rendered meaningless by people who in politics take up their position on the wrong side of the line.

This does not mean, of course, that our political struggles are only a kind of shadow boxing. Parliamentary democracy, as I have already suggested, is only possible not

merely when the Government meets the Opposition at dinner, but also when people feel sincerely and strongly on political issues and are prepared to show that they do. But to be able to carryon party politics vigorously without jeopardising the essential underlying unity of the country is, perhaps, our greatest political gift. It depends, it is true, to a large extent on a refusal to allow political feeling to encroach on territory where it does not legitimately belong. Thus it is a commonplace occurrence in this country for people of opposing political views to work together in agreement on committees and in other ways and then not to allow their differences to interfere. When I was in Germany I was most fortunate in being able to hold frequent gatherings of Germans at week-ends in my own house, to which I invited people of different political parties, social classes and walks of life. I certainly found them very interesting and enjoyable myself, but I think their value was that they enabled people to meet and discuss questions who would otherwise have very rarely met except in circumstances where they felt bound to oppose one another. For in Germany politics keep people apart far more than they do here. It was remarkable how often, when we discussed issues which were not strictly political, such as the housing of refugees or the part that industry, both management and trade unions, could play in adult education, that divisions of opinion cut across the lines of parties or social classes. If I can trust my German guests, they found the experience an unusual and a refreshing one. I believe that, through our social cohesion, we can certainly set Europe an example in political life, which should be of the greatest value. And now we shall not do so in isolation, as we largely did in the nineteenth century, for we shall have opportunities to practise this gift in a European Assembly.

Another aspect of such social cohesion is the second of the qualities which, I feel, enable us to make a contribution to Europe. It is our ability to preserve a balance between a belief in individual freedom and a sense of social responsibility. This makes us ready to accept certain restraints on our freedom in order to preserve an orderly life. A society of the kind that most people wish to see in western Europe and any other would be quite incompatible with the fundamental spirit of our civilisation-needs both principles. We can see in our own national history how at times first we and then the other seemed to be so strong that it almost excluded the other. But out of the great political and, social struggles of the seventeenth century emerged not the victory of a single tradition, but this balance between the two.

This problem of balancing the rights of the individual and those of society as a whole is, however, much more difficult now than it was two hundred years ago. Compared with conditions at any previous time in our history; our society is now inevitably a 'planned society'. To say this raises no party political question. Parties differ about the extent to which society needs to be planned and about the way in which this should be effected. But the nature of our economy and that of all other states in Western Europe, even of those which adopt the most individualist policy, demands a direction from the government which would have seemed intolerable in earlier times. The political police of the modern dictatorships are not simply a sign of sheer human malignity. They are an easy way out of the difficulty of securing this governmental control. Our efforts to find the right way for Parliament to keep some control over nationalised industries, our search for ways in which these industries can avoid the dangers of over-centralisation; our attempts to enable the bureaucracy to work efficiently without resorting to petty tyranny, our determination to share equally goods which are scarce, along with our dislike of filling in the forms which seem to

go with this-all these are examples of our attempts today to preserve this balance, and they are of immense importance, not only for ourselves, but for all western Europe. For these problems are common to all of us and our example in solving them, if we can, may well have a decisive effect.

Because governments have more to do than ever before they are likely to feel that any opposition is merely something that leads to incompetence. And in the highly organised society of today incompetence is far more dangerous than it is in a simpler one. They have also new means of controlling public opinion, for instance, through a government-controlled press or wireless or through the modern technique of creating mass movements, which it is very tempting for them to use. And bureaucracy, which it is easy to sneer at, but which we know we cannot get on without, can easily become an impersonal machine which regards complaints as merely the interference of the inexpert. In fact the problem of the right control of power is the fundamental political issue of the modern world. We solved that in the eighteenth century by accepting the principle of the rule of law, which is the third of the qualities which, it seems to me, we can contribute to Europe: It was this that so impressed Voltaire when he arrived in England in 1726; arbitrary government and the oppression of the weak by the strong seemed to be made impossible by the exercise of the rule of law, which was the same for all, whatever their position in society and whether they were the governing or the governed. In a Europe that in recent years has come to know so well arbitrary arrest, trials used for political purposes and the concentration camp, the establishment of this principle is something that very many people long for. I well remember a lady, who plays a prominent part in politics in Berlin, saying to me last winter: ‘I feel that what we are really fighting for in Berlin is freedom from the fear of the concentration camp, and that is something which is assured by your way of doing things’.

Working Out Afresh the Rule of Law

But it is no use our supposing that because we based our society on the rule of law over two hundred years ago, it is going to be a simple matter to continue to do so now. It was comparatively easy then because in those days the Government interfered very little in men’s lives. Now the Government has to do all kinds of things which it then had nothing to do with: we have only to think of housing or education or transport. The practice has grown up as an administrative convenience for decisions to be made by administrative bodies which in earlier times would have been made by Courts of Justice and this is known as ‘administrative law’. It is, of course, very easy for administrative convenience ‘to be something not very convenient for the ordinary citizen, who may feel that his case is being decided by an interested party. As a result this kind of law has been termed ‘administrative lawlessness’ and ‘bureaucracy triumphant’. We have in this country an important piece of work to do, to ensure that this new kind of law does not become in fact merely a way in which the bureaucracy can decide any disputed point to its own advantage. I do not believe that we can possibly go back to the practices of the last two centuries. We simply have not time for them in our present-day complicated society. We have to remember that among the ‘whips and scorns of time’ of which Hamlet spoke when he contemplated the ills of life, in his most famous soliloquy, come ‘the law's delay'. But another was the insolence of office’. A modern dictatorship need not be fascist or communist; it can be that of an unintelligent bureaucracy. Again, our traditions place us in a particularly favourable position to solve this problem and, if we do, we shall contribute something

of real value to the creation of a sound society in Western Europe. But the rule of law has to be worked out afresh in each phase of society, according to the circumstances of the time. We have to learn the very hard lesson, expressed once by 'AE' the Irish poet, that 'no country can marry any particular solution and live happily ever afterwards'.

Parliamentary Traditions of Europe

A special danger faces us, however, just because we have such a too must now arise from our sleep and abandon our rest remarkable and successful tradition of ordered liberty. It is that we should think that the forms of our political life are going to be useful to Europe rather than the actual way_ in which we solve our problems. Our natural pride in our past achievements, coupled with our ignorance of European history and ways of life, render us particularly liable to make this error. For instance, we are very proud of our parliamentary traditions; we think of Westminster as the Mother of Parliaments. Actually it is not quite accurate to say that the English Parliament was the first on the scene. Spain was really ahead of us. However, it can be claimed that our Parliament had a vitality which kept it alive while most others decayed and disappeared. But at the European Assembly at Strasbourg it seems already to have become clear that the parliamentary traditions of Europe derive rather from the Assemblies of the French Revolution than from Westminster. It is very doubtful whether our parliamentary technique, of which we have every reason to be proud, is going to be a particularly useful contribution. There is no reason why we should alter our ways at Westminster, though it is true that some are coming to feel that we might learn a good deal from the system of committees to be found in some continental parliaments. But we must not necessarily expect to find other nations nor any European Assembly adopting our procedure.

This does not mean, of course, that all our parliamentary traditions are irrelevant to Europe's needs. I cannot help feeling that we have one in particular which will prove of great value, that of the responsibility placed on the Opposition and the respect in which it is held. Our phrase 'His Majesty's Opposition' is one that I have found in my experience to make a great impression in Europe.

I have said so much about culture and education that perhaps I should make it clear that I do not feel that we shall solve all these problems by creating more committees to study them. As far as education is concerned, I believe that we should continue to work through Unesco, where we have a great part to play. I am far from feeling that it is any disadvantage that this includes countries which will not be in any European Union. We do not want to make any new cultural isolationism. I have suggested, rather, that it is through certain qualities in our way of life that we can help to create a feeling of kinship in the Union, namely first, our social cohesion; secondly, the balance we have attained between our belief in individual freedom on the one hand and the acceptance by each one of us of a responsibility for the acts of the whole community on the other; and thirdly, our faith in the principle of the rule of law. as a means of- controlling power. I have attempted to show in earlier lectures that before now in our history, especially in the eighth and eighteenth centuries, we have proved ourselves able to contribute much to European civilisation. We did so then because we came closer to Europe. We understood it and it was able to understand us. During the nineteenth century we became more separated from Europe and we have now to

try to learn to understand it once more. I suggested that one difficulty that had to be overcome was the inability of the different peoples of Europe to speak with one another and to read one another's literature. All that I have said has been based on a belief in the value of our own national traditions. I myself cannot think of Britain now or in the future without contemplating her past. But it is no use our offering Europe our past; we have to contribute our present. The danger is that we may not realise what is wanted of us now. We may feel that after the last thirty years we have done enough.

Perhaps I may illustrate our position today from an old French poem of the Middle Ages, the 'Song of Roland'. This tells how Roland and the rearguard of Charlemagne's army were treacherously attacked in the pass of Roncesvalles on their return from an expedition against the Saracens in Spain. Charlemagne heard very far off the sound of Roland's magic horn, calling for his help. Hastily he returned with his main army. The enemy were defeated after a hard battle and then, on the same day, the Emperor finished his work by a great trial of the traitor, who was condemned to an ignominious death. At last, utterly weary, he went to his bed and fell asleep. But the rest he had so fully earned was denied him. An angel appeared in his room and summoned him from his sleep, calling him to rise, for the pagans were attacking one of the frontier cities of his Empire. 'Ah, God!' cried the Emperor, 'how laborious is my life'. He started from his sleep and tore at his long, white beard. And with those words the poem ends, the end truest to life of any epic ever written. In fact, there never is an end to the need for endeavour by man or nation. In that condition we now find ourselves. For us too the pagan stands at the gate of the city and, however much we may fuel we have earned the reward of our labours, we too must now arise from our sleep and abandon our rest.

Whatever we may think about European Union, we should realise that there are many thousands in Europe who look to this country to lead them in creating that common way of life which will satisfy their spiritual needs and will create the unity for which they long. We cannot help them now with material resources; the e they know can only come from across the Atlantic. But at least this means that we are no longer separated from them by a 'moneyed look'. We are suffering from the same crisis as they are. If we can appreciate what Europe looks for in us, we shall realise that it is no longer enough merely to say to ourselves that 'we work or want'. On our readiness to work and our ability to solve the problems of our society will depend the survival of faith in our civilisation in other lands than our own. We are fighting a bigger battle than many of us realise.

Noise not a Measure of Patriotism

But we must not lose heart because people who support other ways of me sometimes seem to be more sure of themselves. One of the marks of modern ideologists is that they all make a great deal of noise; well-trained crowds shout applause, political controversy is carried on in strident tones, opponents are quelled with violent abuse. This is not really a sign of strength, but weakness arising from a fundamental lack of confidence. The common culture of Western Europe must be something much deeper and much more quiet. Some of the wisest words ever spoken about patriotism came from Thomas Masaryk, the founder of Czechoslovakia, and I am glad to end my lectures with a reference to the modern statesman whom, I think, I admire more than

any other. ‘Real love for one’s nation is a very beautiful thing’ he said, ‘with a decent and honest man it comes as a matter of course; therefore he does not talk much about it, just as a decent man does not go trumpeting abroad his love for his wife, family and so on. A real love protects, bears sacrifices-and chiefly works’. In the end we shall have to come to love Western Europe in the same kind of genuine, unconscious way that we love our country, the way expressed by Rupert Brooke, writing abroad about England:

There the dews
Are soft beneath a morn of gold
Here tulips bloom as they are told;
Unkempt about those hedges blows
An English unofficial rose;
And there the unregulated sun
Slopes down to rest when day is done,
And wakes a vague unpunctual star,
A slippered Hesper.

This love will be no more a contradiction of our national patriotism than is our affection for our country incompatible with our love for our own families. We shall not find it by ‘trumpeting’ about Western Europe, but by being ready to protect it and to bear sacrifices for it-and chiefly by working for it.