

"VACUUM OF FAITH"

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EVEN before 1944 actually arrived, most Canadians had a feeling of decision and even of destiny which heralded its approach. Invasion year, election year, the prospect of victory over Germany—all these circumstances "added up" to something out of the ordinary. People felt instinctively that 1944 would see the making of history in the world of ideas, even as the year that had gone was heavy with historic significance in the realm of military achievement.

Already that battle of ideas is upon us. The prospect of political combat lures us on. For many it transcends in importance the struggle for national survival which has not yet been won. That unfinished business with Hitler and Hirohito! In the background the rumble of the political caissons is making itself heard. Party machines are being stripped for battle. Political ferment is becoming ever more apparent throughout the land.

Yet, somehow or other, most of us approach the moment of political decision with misgiving. Not alone because of the unfinished business across the seas. But because the nature of the contest no longer fits into the confident, well-worn grooves of other years. Because we cannot discern on the political horizon anything which fits into our time-honored concept of an election campaign. Because the issue is no longer a simple choice between the two political faiths of our fathers. Because new, discordant images loom to blur our vision of the political scene. Because the kaleidoscopic picture of a Conservative past and a Liberal present and a C.C.F. future whirls in hopeless confusion before our eyes.

Nowadays most of us, when we take time to think at all, feel as if the intellectual props upon which we had been accustomed to rely in the past had been pulled from under us, leaving our minds dangling unhappily in what Mr. Geoffrey Growther describes as "a vacuum of faith". This same uncertainty permeates our economic as well as our political outlook. It extends even to the wider sphere of international relations. We don't know where we're heading, and we don't know why. In a mad endeavour to grasp some reality of belief, we either hold tenaciously to the outmoded shibboleths of our political and economic past, or we seize wildly upon the utterances of some "Mad Mullah" of the forum to lead us out of our uncertainty.

Between 1935 and 1939, people spoke of the "war of nerves".

It was the uncertainty—we used to say—that “got us down”. If there must be war, then let it come, so that we could learn the worst and no longer be tortured by the gnawing fear of the unknown.

Now we seem to suffer from another war of nerves. We shudder on the brink of victory, and wonder whether the war's end may not bring forth happenings more terrible than anything Hitler has been able to produce. Already we hear—in imagination—the screaming bombs of political revolt and the block busters of economic turmoil. And most of us, if we are truly honest with ourselves, hope for peace, but not “in our time”—meaning thereby that we cannot face the implications of a return to the “normalcy” of 1939.

Sooner or later we must come to grips with reality. This strange war of nerves in the ideological realm must end. We cannot remain indefinitely suspended in “a vacuum of faith”. For—as the editor of *The Economist* points out—“the trouble about a vacuum is that it gets filled, and if there are no angels available to fill it, fools, or worse, rush in”.

How that vacuum gets filled is important. It is just as important as the battles that are now being waged against the forces of totalitarianism abroad. And there is no dearth of fools, and worse, right here on the home front who would willingly fill it.

To say—as some do—that the doctrines of the nineteenth century, if not dead, are so battered that they will not serve us any longer as our main props, is strong medicine for most. To suggest that such concepts as responsible government, free enterprise, national sovereignty are but the dogmas of a past already dead, would be to do violence to the principles upon which most of us were reared. Yet there are Canadians aplenty who would—and do—profane these very principles, and hold them up to ridicule and abuse. Recognizing this, it is all the more alarming to hear so eminent a student of affairs as the editor of *The Economist* of London declare that “If there is any carry-over of dominant principles from the former age to the latter, it will be a matter for marvelling”.

Mr. Crowther makes much of what he chooses to call “the circumstances of our century”. In those circumstances—he declares—there is much which leads straight to Fascism. The enormous developments in the technique of propaganda and advertising, in the power to sway the minds of the people in the mass, in the growth of large scale industry, in the need for gigan-

tie aggregations of capital, in the implications of a maximum employment policy—all these create the danger of a concentration of economic power.

The same reasoning applies in the international sphere. There you have the residuum of military power resting solely in the hands of a few highly industrialized states, with the smaller nations quite helpless to assert their sovereignty, or even to protect it, except by the grace of the Great Powers.

It isn't easy to turn back the clock of political or economic evolution. The radio and the aircraft and the assembly line of mass production are here with us. We must accept their existence. But we need not necessarily accept blindly the outward implications of that existence!

Who can deny that the last four years have led us a long way from the kind of liberal democracy for which we honestly believed we were fighting, back in 1914-1918? Can it be gainsaid that Canadians have already progressed far along the road of rigid state control, exercised, it is true, in the interest of a war economy—but exercised, and even accepted, none the less? And don't most of us think that the League of Nations was a bit of starry-eyed idealism which couldn't hope to last in a world of power-mad wolves? Do any of us, indeed, look to any immediate international framework for the post-war era other than a concentration of strength in the hands of the Big Three—the British Commonwealth, the United States and the Soviet Union?

Here in Canada we have been assaulted by the futuristic political and economic bombast of those who think they see clearly the march of events and who want to be in step with the times—even if, by keeping in step, the Canadian people march straight down the road of totalitarianism. Tugging at our coat-sleeves, sneering and contemptuous, urging us to forget everything and return to the nineteenth century faith of our fathers, political, economic, international, hover the horde of Colonel Blimps—that body of uncompromising diehards whose very attitudes of reaction have given greater impetus to revolution than all else combined.

No wonder that we find ourselves in the midst of a war of nerves more devastating than anything that the punch-drunk radio commentators of the thirties were able to evoke!

We know that the march of time and tide will not allow us to cling forever to the beliefs of the past. Most of us abhor equally drifting with the current—knowing as we must, to use Geoffrey Growther's words once more, "that there is a great

deal in the circumstances of our century that leads straight to Fascism".

What people seek is an escape from those grim alternatives. An escape without which there can be but little hope and little happiness to look for from the victory that now appears already within our grasp. Escape from "the circumstances of our century"!

But whither leads that road? And where may be found men with that vision and sagacity needed to lead us from our present dilemma of hovering uncertainty? Must the issues remain thus sharply defined in black and white? Is there nothing to fill the vacuum between the regimentation of control on the one hand and the abandon of the profit motive unrestrained on the other? Must each be regarded as inherently evil by the exponents of the other? Have we lost forever that strange power of synthesis, of compromise, which has been the saving grace of the Anglo-Saxon people down through the centuries?

Clearly, there can be no political or economic progress without an issue. It is that issue which we Canadians need so desperately to-day. An issue which admits of debate, of give and take, of compromise and evolution and growth. An issue not of principle, but of degree. We may not be able to escape the circumstances of our century entirely, but surely it is not beyond our capacities to guide and mould those circumstances, rather than to become pawns in a play of forces over which we have no control.

Where principles prevail, there can be no compromise. To try to reconcile the notion of state socialism in the abstract with the notion of free enterprise in the abstract is an utter waste of time. But to seek to find a sensible balance between the social incentive and the economic incentive of the community, or indeed of the whole country, is not only possible but sensible as well. Thus far the battle of political and economic ideas has been waged almost entirely on the abstract plane of principle. It is high time we began to rid our minds of much of this ideological nonsense, and got "down to brass tacks" on the more practical problems of degree.

Social security in all its wider implications may be a thoroughly desirable thing. But if social security for all means penury for most, then we must consider the degree of social security which we can afford.

Free enterprise, in the sense that a man has a right to make his way as he chooses, is abhorrent only when it becomes anti-

social. But it is perfectly possible to make free enterprise provide some of the benefits of social security, so long as we are careful not to tax or regulate free enterprise out of existence. And the menace of exploitation can be met by having the sort of labor code and labor courts that will provide adequate protection.

Freedom of speech and freedom of religion are accepted unquestioningly by Canadians as an essential part of our way of life. But the laws of libel draw a nice line between freedom and licence so far as speech is concerned, while the unwritten code of moral conduct stands as a firm barrier against religious practices which would be abhorrent to the whole community. What we choose to call freedom of religion does not extend to such practices as the making of a human sacrifice, or the mutilating of the human body in the name of religion.

There is no reason why in the economic sphere as well we cannot find the equivalent controls to prevent orgiastic exploitation on the one hand or totalitarian regimentation on the other. The former leads to dictatorship the long way round. The latter reaches the same destination by the direct route. Somewhere along the way lie the inadequate, fumbling, uncertain but none the less individualistic instruments which will lead to economic democracy, just as *Magna Carta*, and *Habeas Corpus*, and the *Bill of Rights* have led us along the road to political democracy. Some may regard that political democracy as a sort of Purgatory, but at any rate it is better than the Hell offered by either of the other logical possibilities.

In the international realm, too, we shall have to forget principles and devote our attention to degree. There, too, the choice cannot remain clear-cut and uncompromising. The issue of national sovereignty versus collective security is insoluble. The issue of *how much* collective security versus *how much* state sovereignty reduces the dilemma to the realm of the possible. Nineteenth century principles may be meaningless to-day, but the methods of the past in reaching a solution are not.

The confusion which now confronts Canadians is a confusion born of the unbending, doctrinaire rigidity of political and economic fanatics both of the Right and of the Left, of the Dead and of the Unborn. Neither bears any immediate relationship to the Present. The Future can belong to neither, unless Canadians are content to accept the totalitarian alternatives. Democracy holds no place for Absolutism in the economic sphere, any more than it does in the political or the international.