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Bill Jones Bob Smillie

Bertrand Russell
and
Industrial
Democracy

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Ken Coates

Bertrand Russell and Industrial Democracy

It was in 1914 that Bertrand Russell joined the Labour Party. Before that date he had been involved in a large number of radical causes, including a whole series of crusades against different aspects of imperialism, and, of course, the movement for women's suffrage. His first published book had been a study of German Social Democracy, originally prepared for a series of lectures, in 1896, at the recently established London School of Economics. His exposure to socialist ideas and socialist acquaintances began very early, and was not always painless. His friendship with Bernard Shaw involved him, in 1895, in being run over by the sage's bicycle, during a trip to Tintern Abbey. "If you hear rumours of my death" wrote Shaw to Pakenham Beatty, "contradict them. I have had a most awful bicycle smash – the quintessence of ten railway collisions – brother of Earl Russell of conjugal fame dashed into at full speed flying downhill – £3 10s. damage to machine – Russell bereft of knickerbockers but otherwise unhurt." In spite of, or perhaps because of, such influences as this, Russell continued to regard himself as in many respects an orthodox liberal during all his early years, and, indeed, well into the twentieth century.

The first world war produced, among many other crises, a crisis in liberalism. Russell's decision to join the Labour movement was not, however, simply a transfer of allegiance based upon a rational evaluation of his experience: although it certainly included that. It also included the man's extraordinary

capacity for tenacity in support of his ideas, and his completely dedicated readiness to sacrifice his own comfort and security without a moment's hesitation, where his principles were at stake.

Russell became a contributor to the *Labour Leader*, the journal of the Independent Labour Party, and a stalwart partisan of the No Conscription Fellowship, on whose behalf he ultimately went to prison. But he was drawn towards the Guild Socialist Movement, and became increasingly convinced that socialism must rest upon the multiplication of democratic initiatives from the roots of society upwards, rather than simply upon the wisdom of the planners who perched on the uppermost branches of the social tree. Maurice Reckitt, an old Guildsman, records a meeting of the Guilds League in the Fabian Hall, during a German air raid.

"We were being addressed by that expert in mordant detachment, Bertrand Russell . . . He did not bat an eyelid or condescend to take the slightest notice, but continued the development of his argument. The noise rapidly became louder and even intimidatingly so, the chairman went very green, and seemed to be debating whether it were more alarming to interrupt the Olympian philosopher or to remain under that skylight any longer. At length a particularly sinister crash drove him to call the speaker's attention to the situation. Bertrand Russell looked round disapprovingly, sighed a little, and relinquished the argument, which few of us that time by had been attempting to follow . . ."

If the German government's aerial threats did not intimidate Russell, neither did the earthbound ones of the British government. In 1917, he was invited to give a lecture in Glasgow, at a meeting under the chairmanship of Bob Smillie, the miners' leader. "Just before it was to have been delivered, the

Government forbade me to enter what were called 'prohibited areas', among which Glasgow was included," he wrote later. "These areas included everything near the sea-coast, and the order was intended against spies to prevent them from signalling to German submarines. The War Office, however, was kind enough to say that it did not suspect me of being a spy for the Germans. It only charged me with inciting industrial disaffection to stop the war." The meeting went ahead, and Smillie spoke. In fact, he read out Russell's forbidden lecture, and later he wrote in his memoirs that he found its words to be among the most beautiful he had ever spoken.

The lecture began with a defiant argument about the development of individual personality as the criterion of a good society, and went on:

"in our own day the tyranny of vast machine-like organisations, governed from above by men who know and care little for the lives of those whom they control, is killing individuality and freedom of mind, and forcing men more and more to conform to a uniform pattern.

Vast organisations are an inevitable element in modern society, and it is useless to aim at their abolition, as has been done by some reformers, for instance, William Morris. It is true that they make the preservation of individuality more difficult, but what is needed is a way of combining them with the greatest possible scope for individual initiative.

One very important step toward this end would be to render democratic the government of every organisation. At present, our legislative institutions are more or less democratic . . . but our administration is still bureaucratic, and our economic organisations are monarchical or oligarchic. Every limited liability company is run by a small number of self-appointed or co-opted directors. There can

be no real freedom or democracy until the men who do the work in a business also control its management.”

These subversive words were well-received in Glasgow, and the Government did not proceed against Smillie, as he had half-expected, for uttering them. As Russell laconically observed later, “They were too dependent upon coal . . .”

The following year, Russell published his *Roads to Freedom – Socialism, Anarchism and Syndicalism*. In this work he greatly modified some of his earlier, liberal opinions about socialism: but a full discussion of his ideas about socialism, and about Marx in particular, would need, were it to be undertaken properly, a book. What is important to our theme in this essay is his treatment of the great syndicalist revolt which had broken out among British Trade Unionists in the pre-war years. Pioneers like Tom Mann had not only held Government itself at bay in a series of convulsive strikes, but developed a powerful doctrine of workers’ control, which had increasingly taken hold of the imaginations of working men during the struggles which continued throughout the wartime period. Their ideas, wrote Russell,

“have done a great deal to revive the Labour Movement and to recall it to certain things of fundamental importance which it had been in danger of forgetting. Syndicalists consider man as a producer rather than a consumer. They are more concerned to procure freedom in work than to increase material well-being. They have revived the quest for liberty, which was growing somewhat dimmed under the regime of parliamentary socialism, and they have reminded men that what our society needs is not a little tinkering here, there, nor the kind of minor readjustments to which the existing holders of power may readily

consent, but a fundamental reconstruction, a sweeping away of all the sources of oppression, a liberation of men’s constructive energies, and a wholly new way of conceiving and regulating production and economic relations.”

It is in the light of this credo that Russell’s struggle against the war should be interpreted. His morality did not permit him the luxuries of a “home” policy and a “foreign” policy: what he offered was always an integrated criticism of the power-structure of the world he confronted, so that his opposition to militarism was part and parcel of his commitment to a different form of society. The fact that he later became a foremost spokesman of the world-wide movement for peace has tended to obscure the values which he based his support for that movement. But their reality can be clearly perceived in his struggles between 1914 and 1918. Early in 1917, following the Russian February Revolution, there was organised, in Leeds, a National Convention of Labour. Everyone from MacDonald and Bevin to Mann and Gallacher was there. It was resolved to establish workers’ councils throughout Britain. Retrospectively, it was a gathering with more colour than serious intent, although at the time it greatly alarmed King George V. However, Russell, in his speech to the Convention, punctuated the speeches about workers’ control and the need to form soviets with an impassioned plea for support for the imprisoned conscientious objectors, who, he said had shown the possibility of resistance to the intentions of statesmen. In this he was true to form: he spoke to gatherings of socialists about the need to impose peace, and to gatherings of pacifists about the necessity of social revolution. In so doing, he established a pattern of connections upon which he was to continually insist in the later, at times lonelier, struggles of his last decade.

After the war, he became a member of the Labour delegation to the new Soviet Union. His reservations about Russian Communism were published in his famous work, more quoted than read, *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*. This book, marked as it is by its time, nonetheless contains some percipient insights.

“It may be assumed that when Socialism is first introduced, the higher technical and business staff will side with the capitalists and attempt sabotage unless they have no hopes of a counter-revolution. For this reason it is very necessary that among wage-earners there should be as wide a diffusion as possible of technical and business education, so that they may be able immediately to take control of big complex industries. In this respect Russia was very badly off, whereas England and America would be much more fortunate.

Self-government in industry is, I believe, the road by which England can best approach socialism . . .”

The movement for workers’ control in Britain proved unable to establish “self-government” in the post-war years. After bitter strikes, lockouts, and mass-unemployment, the workers’ rank-and-file leadership was decimated. The mining industry became the focus of a national battle, culminating in the General Strike of 1926. When this was defeated, Beatrice Webb wrote in her diary that the rout would prove “the death-gasp of the pernicious doctrine of workers’ control, preached by Tom Mann.” And indeed it was true that simple trade unionism, never mind workers’ control, had a hard time surviving in the next decade and a half. Russell began his educational experiments during this time, and wrote a series of works which were subsequently widely quoted in the “student power” upsurge which broke loose in the very last years of his life.

It is hardly a coincidence that the international renovation of socialist ideals which began to set in during the 1960’s with the developing struggle against imperialism, powerfully reinforced first by the successful Cuban revolution, and later by the world-wide movement of support for the Vietnamese resistance to American invasion, has also brought in its train a growing interest in ideas of industrial democracy, and a vigorous trade union renewal of the demand for workers’ control. The same power-structure has provoked similar responses in the diverse territories over which it has held sway. And in his ninety fifth year, Russell was quick to understand and act against the authorities who were intensifying, by different but appropriate means, their repression of subject populations at home and abroad. On the very day in 1966 that he spoke to the founding conference of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, he also attended his last demonstration in Trafalgar Square. It was convened by the National Union of Seamen in support of their long strike against Labour Government’s interdiction of their wage-claim.

Having seen the International Tribunal which he established in order to investigate war crimes in Vietnam banned from meeting in London, by ministers of a Labour Government, he also recognised the beginnings of a renewal of socialist agitation at the roots of society. The growth of the movement for workers’ control interested him keenly. In 1968 he addressed a message to the sixth national conference on workers’ control, held at Nottingham University:

“I welcome the growing importance of the workers’ control movement because its demands go to the heart of what I have always understood socialism to mean. The Prime Minister and his friends have developed a quite new definition of

socialism, which includes the penalising of the poorest, capitulating to bankers, attacking the social services, banning the coloured and applauding naked imperialism. When a government makes opportunism the hallmark of its every action, it is the duty of all socialists to cry "halt" and to help create an alternative based on socialist principles. In this urgent task I wish you every success."

Bertrand Russell will rightly be remembered for many different contributions to human knowledge, to civilised thought. But it may well be that his help for this cause will be thought, by succeeding generations, to be among the most crucial engagements of the vast number he took up.

Until mankind is truly free

Though I never had the pleasure of meeting Bertrand Russell, it was with deep sorrow that I heard of his death and it is for me a great honour, indeed, to have been asked to speak at this memorial meeting.

In the first volume of his autobiography, at the age of 95, Bertrand Russell wrote:

"Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life; the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind."

That unbearable pity drove him beyond his preoccupation with philosophy and science to participation in many of the radical movements of his time. He was not afraid, even in his latest years, to face imprisonment in the course of the struggle for those causes in which he so passionately believed. As we pay tribute to one of the greatest figures of modern times, we think of him primarily as a liberator who sought to free humanity from every form of exploitation and repression, whether physical or mental.

In his relentless pursuit of truth, beauty and justice, Russell did not spare himself from the most critical self-examination. He sought to clarify the problems of man in society in his own mind and then to bring enlightenment to his fellow men and women in words of compelling power. Of his philosophical and mathematical work I am absolutely unqualified

to speak. But many of his popular, educational works are, for me, a great fountain of knowledge and wisdom to which one can turn again and again for refreshment. I speak of essays like Authority and the Individual; Why I am not a Christian; Marriage and Morals; Education and the Social Order, and so on.

Russell belonged to the era of decaying capitalism and he believed fervently in the need for a new social order in which poverty, disease, ignorance, superstition, cruelty, greed and fear would no longer afflict mankind. His compassion drove him into the Labour Party and, after many years, drove him out again. He detested cant and hypocrisy and exposed them mercilessly with cutting logic and pointed wit.

With the production of a gigantic stock of nuclear weapons by the two superpowers and the absence of any international agreement for disarmament, Russell, in the late 'Fifties, decided to throw himself into the campaign for peace and against the menace of a nuclear holocaust. Together with Kingsley Martin and others, he launched the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament at the beginning of 1958 and worked with unflagging zeal for its success.

Impatient with conventional forms of political protest, he joined two years later in founding the Committee of 100 to organise civil disobedience. After the mass Sit-In at Trafalgar Square he found himself once more in prison, in his ninetieth year.

In 1962, during the Cuba Crisis, while humanity's survival depended on the decisions of a few men in Washington and Moscow, his stature was such that the heads of the two most powerful states in the world had to reply to the impassioned appeals for sanity that he sent them from his home in North Wales. He helped to inspire and encourage the

demonstrations that took place all over Britain in those critical days when the world was poised on the brink of mass destruction on a colossal scale.

In his book "Has Man a Future?" he spelt out the dangers once more and offered solutions for the avoidance of mutual slaughter. At the same time, he increasingly recognised that it was important to develop contact with the trade union and labour movement and that the growth of giant monopolies and of bureaucratic power in Government and industry required a struggle for democratic control of our economic institutions. With these considerations in mind, he associated himself with the foundation of the Institute for Workers Control. But the fate of working people, particularly in areas where the struggle against colonialism was not yet complete, also aroused his passionate concern. Alongside his appeals on behalf of victims of political persecution in all countries, East or West, his horror at the massive violence perpetrated upon the people of Vietnam by the American aggressor led him to call for the formation, first of all, of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign and then the International War Crimes Tribunal. As a coal-miner who has spent my life fighting against injustice, I was very proud to accept his invitation to me to join the Tribunal and to visit Cambodia and North Vietnam as a member of the second investigating commission on the bombing of civilian targets by the American Air Force. The massive evidence of American atrocities, presented to the Tribunal at its two sessions in Stockholm and Copenhagen, led to the condemnation of the United States Government for the perpetration of war crimes against the Vietnamese people. The recent revelations of the Pinkville and other massacres have completely vindicated the work of the Tribunal and of Bertrand Russell, its initiator. But the voice that condemned American intervention in

Vietnam also condemned the Russian intervention in Czechoslovakia. National independence, economic and social justice, and democratic liberties were, in the eyes of Bertrand Russell, the birthright of the people of every land. In the pursuit of these ideals he worked with selfless devotion and dedication.

His passing is a tremendous blow to us all. But his message, and example, will still encourage us to continue the struggle until mankind is truly free. In recognising that he loved and served humanity, we can pay him no greater tribute than to re-dedicate ourselves to its final liberation.

Bob Smillie

How I lectured for Bertrand Russell

The Hon. Bertrand Russell was not alone in the strong views he held concerning the War. With all right-thinking men, he was desirous of bringing it to an end at the earliest moment if an honourable way could be found which held any hope of national security and a lasting peace for the world.

He had undertaken to deliver a course of lectures, and the War Office seemed to fear they might prove a danger to public order if delivered in certain parts of the country. The odd consequence was that, whilst Mr. Russell might deliver his lecture, say, in Manchester, he was stopped from lecturing in Glasgow, as well as in other places.

In September, 1916, I was asked to take part in a meeting to be held in Glasgow, at which Mr. Russell was to deliver a lecture. I willingly consented not only to attend but to speak, if required.

Within a few days of the time appointed for the meeting to take place, we learned that Mr. Russell had been prohibited from lecturing in Glasgow, and that, being a law-abiding citizen, he had no intention of trying conclusions with the War Office.

On learning of this, a number of Glasgow people met and decided that the best thing to do was to substitute for the lecture a strong protest against any interference with the right of free speech. The Central Hall in Bath Street, Glasgow, was engaged for this meeting, and I was asked to speak. Sir Daniel M. Stevenson, ex-Provost of Glasgow, was asked to take the chair, and he was kind enough to consent.

Two days before this meeting I received a copy of Mr. Russell's lecture. I thought it might be just as well that the lecture, at least, should be delivered, although the lecturer might not be allowed to appear in person. With this in mind I read and re-read the lecture, so that I might be able to get through it without any great difficulty when on the platform.

The meeting was held on October 7, and the hall was filled with very respectable-looking people, who did not look as though they were only awaiting a favourable opportunity to break the law. When I arrived I found Sir Daniel Stevenson in the ante-room; I told him immediately that I proposed to deliver Mr. Russell's lecture to the audience.

He protested against this course being taken. He said: "You cannot do that; you must not do it. It will create a fearful stir, and the newspapers will be down so very heavily if this course is taken."

"Sir Daniel, if I go on to that platform to-night," I replied, "I am going to read this lecture."

Finally he gave way, and said that I would have to take the responsibility. We went on to the platform together, and the chairman opened the meeting in a short, well-chosen speech. He then called upon me to speak to the meeting. There were several Press representatives present, which proved that considerable interest was taken by the Press of the country in the meeting.

I opened my address by stating to the audience that it was a most unusual thing for me to read my speeches, but that nowadays one could not be too careful, as a close watch was being kept on persons like myself, and that we might be open at any time to prosecution for statements made by us. In view of this, I desired to read my address on that occasion.

The opening statement of Mr. Russell's lecture was as follows: "On dark days, men need a clear faith and a well-grounded hope, and as the outcome of these the calm courage which takes no account of hardships by the way."

The lecture from beginning to end continued on this high plane, and I must say that it was one of the most beautiful things that I had ever read, and it helped to strengthen me in my determination to continue to fight for justice and freedom for the common people of the various countries of the world.

I could notice that the Pressmen got very busy with their pencils as soon as I began to read the address; but within a short time some of the reporters, to whom I was well known, in view of the fact that they had previously reported me on many occasions, began to look up from their work with astonishment on their faces.

Many in the audience were also surprised as the reading of Mr. Russell's lecture continued. One of the reporters finally looked up to the platform and spoke in an undertone to Mr. P. J. Dolan and asked him, "Is this Mr. Smillie's own stuff?"

Dolan replied that it was not. I then found that the pencils became less busy, and the reporters, though listening attentively to the address, did not trouble about taking it down. I noticed a number of people in the audience who did not seem to be paying much attention to what I was saying, but who were reading through small books which they held in their hands, and from time to time simultaneously turning over the leaves.

I discovered after the meeting that the lecture had been published in a little pamphlet, and was being sold at the door as the people came into the hall.

When I had finished the lecture, I informed the audience that that was the beautiful message that Mr. Bertrand Russell had been prevented from delivering to the people of Glasgow. I then followed on with a short statement, protesting against interference with the liberty of speech, and especially against the ban on Mr. Russell.

I was fully aware at this time that my utterances were being carefully tabulated at headquarters in London, and that at many of the meetings I attended plain-clothes officers were commissioned to take down my words.

I realised that at any moment I might be placed under arrest, as many influential people were urging this course upon the authorities.

A Great Humanitarian

Address by Bill Jones to the Bertrand Russell Memorial Meeting, March 13, 1970.

Mr. Chairman and Friends,

You said in your opening remarks that this is not a memorial meeting. It seems to me that that gives me the right to say that when you refer to the speech of Bob Smillie and then we are told by Lawrence Daly that he is this evening reading his speech, I feel compelled to say that for the first time in my public life, I'm reading my speech. It may be that it is getting a bad habit and it may be that I'm doing it because I realise, appreciate and have got enough intelligence to understand the purpose of this meeting.

Mr. Chairman, Friends, it may very well be that some people may find it both strange and peculiar that an ordinary rank and file trade unionist, which I happen to be, is on this platform this evening paying tribute to a gifted scholar, a great mathematician and one of the world's leading philosophers. I will have no doubt that many of those on the platform this evening will speak of, and applaud, the work and ability of Earl Russell in the fields of learning and applaud his contribution to the knowledge of mankind. I am not able to do that, but I would want to pay my tribute and make my acknowledgement to the active assistance, many times at personal risk, he gave to those causes which indicated his deep appreciation and sympathy for the problems of mankind; the struggle against war and poverty and the need and

the vision for a better and kinder society. Bertrand Russell was for me, and many other members of the working class, something greater than a gifted scholar, something greater than a giant intellect, he was a great humanitarian, a man who was closer to understanding the misery of poverty throughout the world. His academic teaching, and mind, did not prevent him seeing all those economic and political pressures which are responsible for the world's misery, hunger and wars. He saw these things much more clearly than other learned men who were in a position, and who are in a position, to do more than he did, but in fact who have done less. It is, therefore, his humanity, his regard and sympathy for the common people of the world rather than his high academic ability and learning that I would want to acknowledge as a member of the working class.

He was to me a better socialist than many of those in high places who claim to be socialists. He appeared to me to dislike the hypocrisy of our society and some of its more learned members, who appear to think it both right and proper for socialists to support what the United States is doing in Vietnam, who consider it within the ethics and principles of socialism to threaten the use of nuclear arms, through NATO, rather than to spend the cost of such weapons on the aged, on hospitals, on schools, and improved social services.

He was an active humanitarian in that he believed in more than just giving expression to the cause of peace and a more dignified and just society. He held action was necessary to support the word. In that he was different and stood out from many other learned scholars and socialists. I, personally, never met nor spoke to Bertrand Russell. The nearest I got to him was one Sunday afternoon sitting by a lake in Geneva — and I wish he was sitting there beside me at that time — reading Russell's first volume of

his autobiography, when I was approached by a young West Indian student who I'd seen eyeing me for some time, who asked me was that Earl Russell's book. When I replied, "Yes", he said; "When I get home I propose to purchase it because I believe that he done more for the youth of East and West than any other philosopher". I often have wondered since then how many learned men have had, or could hope to have, such an epitaph.

Of course he made mistakes, but then so did Napoleon, so did Stalin and so did Churchill, and there are many learned and powerful men in the world today still making mistakes.

Mr. Chairman, I searched for a long while in the literature of the world in order to find, for me, a quotation that fitted his life's work better than any other. I came across this from a writer from the fifteenth century, Joachim du Bellay: "Happy is he, who like Ulysses, has made a fine journey". Friends, it may be a long time before we see, or hear, another Bertrand Russell. His memory should last us a long time. I feel privileged, as a trade unionist, and as the Chairman of the Institute for Worker's Control, to have been asked to come here this evening to pay my humble tribute to a great man. This hope I have done in a manner in which he would have understood and accepted.

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