

## B 6. CAN DEMOCRACY DEAL WELL WITH ITS SOCIAL PROBLEMS ?

(A 3. problem list reordered & with some more detail here.)

The philosophy and practice of democracy in handling controversies requires some discussion. The term democracy refers both to a broad social philosophy and to a set of governmental structures and political processes. We must deal briefly with both. Each may be said to imply the other; the social philosophy calls for such institutionalization, and the institutions could be expected to be based on a consensus on a democratic social philosophy. Such a philosophy ignores social classes and treats the rights common to all individuals as worthy of respect. One of those rights is to be able to express their own views. Another is to have a fair chance to develop their own finest potentialities. One question is how the economy can maximize such opportunities and the other economic and non-economic objectives which we all share. Another question is how can the political process handle the controversies where we do not agree on objectives or on the means to achieve those we share? Basically the answers are supposed to be that we can achieve a consensus on both through talking together about our views. As it is sometimes put, truth will win out through much discussion.

But the political process as it has developed does not involve much talking together to understand our differences and to see on what we have or can develop a consensus. The process has become highly partisan and adversarial instead. This is alleged to promote at least temporary resolutions of controversies to which all consent, since all views could be heard before votes are counted. In practice, however, partisan rivalry focuses primarily on who gets the chance to propose and more importantly to vote on governmental policies, with much less than adequate resolution of, let alone fair and thorough discussion of, the whole range of complex issues that ought to be faced. The determination of policies to be advocated by a political party is even less enlightened and enlightening than is the subsequent contest with the other party or parties in many cases.

The rise of late campaign TV political commercials threatens however to remove the final semblance of fair and rational discussion of policy issues from the election process. Elections are no longer bought by bribing voters at the polls, but special interest financing of elections was an absolute scandal that long cried out for correction. Mild reform did not complete the job. The free speech issue opposition is itself fraudulent--when some have money to flood the mass communications media so those with little or no money can hardly be heard. The final outcome is in any case heavily influenced by the amount of pressure brought upon elected officials and bureaucrats by affluent special economic interest groups or groups advocating specific public policies.

The adversarial nature of the political process dominates and distorts the sort of discussion that is most needed. The sort of discussion that is most needed is that through which people come to fuller understanding of each other, come to understand that they have more values and interests in common than old controversies indicate, and through which discussion they proceed to work out some agreements on ways of trying to solve the common social problems. We need discussion to evolve an increasing consensus on both ends and means. Such consensus should not be undermined for partisan political advantage. There will always remain enough disagreement over still unresolved issues for candidates to give the public a choice between fairly stated and agreed upon differences on specific matters.

As to broad economic philosophies, it can be said that proponents of each often tend to be much too doctrinaire and inflexible, and much too ready to misrepresent the others, when in fact there is a broad area of consensus on values across the spectrum and a broad area of consensus on some important issues between conservatives and liberals when they are not doctrinaire or seeking political advantage. Where they continue to disagree, voters deserve opportunities for policy choices after thorough and fair discussion.

Viewed historically, it is amazing how much economic progress was made in the 20th century in some countries. Whether some of the accompanying inequity was unnecessary is perhaps debatable. But equity issues now are clearly inherent in economic issues. A democratic social philosophy calls for an economy that is increasingly humane as well as productive, an economy with both good working conditions and good living conditions, available to all. Though muddling through has gotten us to our present stage of accomplishment and failure, it is less certain that it can enable us to grapple successfully with the problems of the present, let alone those of the future.

Our tendency these days is to suppose that technological progress can be counted upon to solve many if not all problems. Technological progress may help us deal better with some of the environmental problems, but it is not all that will be needed to deal adequately even with them. And most socio-economic problems will require at least a few changes somewhere in our ideologies and in some of our institutions. Our ideologies include all the ideas in our heads, all the values we profess and those we live by, and various degrees of emotional attachment to various ideas and values. Our ideologies are in part responsible both for the accomplishments about which we like to boast and for the problems that they prevent us from dealing with adequately. The other responsibility for both accomplishments and unsolved problems, lies chiefly with the entire set of institutions that we have

developed in each culture. It is of course important that the leadership a society follows and the policies employed grapple effectively with the problems. A social ethic must replace a “smart-guy ethic”. SEE **K 1**.

The question is whether democracies will be able to develop the leadership and policies consistent with the needed changes in ideology and institutions that would be most helpful in meeting present and future problems? For this to occur, more people than at present will need to understand what is necessary and work actively to promote the desirable changes. (See related discussions in Sections A, B, C, E, G, H, I, J, K, L.)

Present problems need to be grouped under several headings without being able to spell out the specific problems noted under each heading. Problem areas are listed in what I consider to be their order of importance as indicated at the beginning of each category:

1. **GOVERNMENT**: The primary way a society has to provide a framework within which progress can be made in dealing with any social problem well is through governmental action to provide a desirable framework and an appropriate set of policies. Much more can then be done by others in organizations or as private businesses or as individuals. Government’s role is vital from the beginning and on a continuing basis. Do not confuse the size and the scope of government. Be open to a variety of experiments to deal better with the various defects of different governments.

The scope of ordinary government action may need to be enlarged only when needed infrastructure needs maintaining or expanding or more generally if the public feels that is the best way to remedy some public goods shortages. Good public education is a necessity for any society, and that involves dealing constructively with youth from poor backgrounds. The total tax structure to be fair must be progressive. Rational public debt policy is a necessity. Efforts must be continually made to minimize money in all political & government processes. News oligopolies must not be allowed to dominate public news outlets of any type, so divergent views are easily available to everyone. Investigative journalism is a necessity & must be permitted and not discouraged. Profit must be eliminated from the political advertising essential to conducting the political process fairly, and fairness must be assured. SEE OTHER ESSAYS IN **B**.

2. **VIOLENCE**: Violence causes more unnecessary human suffering than any other thing, increases many problems and really solves none by itself. It is of absolutely of major importance to end international wars & minimize civil wars & terrorism. We now do much that helps breed inter-personal violence. How reverse this and teach empathy and non-violence and de-institutionalize all forms of violence? SEE ESSAYS IN **H, I, & J**.

3. **DEVELOPMENT:** Close to 3/4 of the world population is now seemingly caught in a poverty trap from which they have not been able to extricate themselves. Even countries where the majority of people have decent standards of living there are unnecessarily large pockets of poverty, some even working full time and yet not paid a living wage. And in three large continents all but a few are poverty-stricken, while the few are quite well off. These problems cry out for progress in solving them, but progress is scarce & there is even backsliding. How could each country best develop?

The following are needed especially where poverty is extensive: Increases in the per hour productivity of human labor, measured by contributions to human well-being, increases in fair opportunities for everyone to develop their finer human potentials & harmonize their creativities with others and with nature, more Investment in human & other capital and in technological improvement, & development of inventiveness, entrepreneurship & management talents in firms & gov't. **SEE A 1.**

4. **ECOLOGY:** Humans depend upon the environment for natural resources, for energy, and for our whole life support system. Population, and material standards of living cannot grow forever on a finite planet, & we are now pressing growth limits in some respects. We must quickly find ways to reduce current rates of depletion and pollution, must find ways to reduce & then end our dependence upon fossil fuels & use other energy sources, must stop overloading our life support system & so put world economies on a long run sustainable basis. All are far from it now. It will cost money & create jobs & business must accommodate or suffer much more later. **SEE A 5.**

5. **INSECURITY:** Market economies maximize interdependence & insecurity, but also can deal best with that problem by a combination of private and social insurance properly organized. The U.S. lags in medical insurance & privatization threatens our Social Security. Can we learn better? **SEE A 2.**

6. **BUSINESS:** The entire economy is dominated by business operations and the business culture. Scams & dishonesty should cease to exist in business culture. Adequate regulation & social accountability in the public interest should be comprehensive. Employee, customer, community & environmental interests as stakeholders should be better served than presently. Special problems are involved in subjecting finance to a role subordinate to actual production instead of a dominating role. Business ideology (smart guy ethic & profit without regard to who is hurt) should be replaced by defensible profits for social responsibility aimed at human well-being (not manipulating wants by advertising) and improving working conditions & living conditions. **SEE C & K 1.**

7. JUSTICE: Everyone subjected to unfair treatment objects to it as injustice, as we do to anything felt to be unjust, and people are always trying to achieve a more just world. We need to distinguish the different types of justice: distributive, retributive, procedural, just outcomes. Attention must be paid to correcting discrimination, protecting civil, political, and human rights in inter-personal & inter-group relations. Tax systems need to be fair & reduce excessive inequalities (in economic & power). Poverty, amid affluence is unjust, as is homelessness & unaffordable housing. **SEE K 4.**

8. GLOBALIZATION: Presently the world is probably permanently globalized in communication & transportation, but here has been little facing of the question as to how much economic globalization would be good or how fast that good degree should be achieved. Clearly it should be controlled and regulation by governments, not by transnational corporations as it is presently. Regulate especially unstable international capital. Fair trade not free trade. should be sought and developed. Prevent the intellectual property rights movement from curtailing freedom of scientific information exchange or working to the disadvantage of economic development of the less developed countries. Reduce outsourcing & tax havens. **SEE G**

9. CYCLICAL INSTABILITY: This old problem can now be handled relatively well, so it occurs far down the list, although not all governments are moderating and offsetting irregular cycles and dealing well with different types of unemployment and inflation as they could. **SEE A 6, 7, 8.**

10. SECTORAL: This is a catch whatever is left category. It includes some important problems of very different character. I confine myself here to merely listing main categories of remaining problems not listed elsewhere:

Agriculture, labor, consumer, youth, urban & rural community problems, not further detailed here. Racial, ethnic & religious divisions, and cultural problems like socializing children & adolescents & dealing with anti-social behaviors.

Some problems are global problems that cannot be dealt with entirely satisfactorily by nations acting independently. They each need to be handled by some global institutional mechanisms. Some have already been developed, but others have not yet been developed. An organization promoting their development now calls itself CITIZENS FOR GLOBAL SOLUTIONS, with headquarters at 418 7th Street SE, Washington DC 20003.

(At this writing, none of what I lumped together as sectoral problems are treated on my website, though they are also important. Some might be added later, as I have written at length on some of them, though not at all on some others.)

Can social rationality now be developed to contribute in rational ways to dealing with these problems? And for how many of the ten different categories of problems can a case be made that democracies are easily capable of handling which problems, which can be handled with some difficulty, and which, if any, does it now seem unlikely that democracies will be unable to handle at all well in the foreseeable future? What is the record thus far, country by country? What about undemocratic countries' records?

Some of these problems will almost certainly continue to be future problems, not likely settled completely in the short run. In the future the national security system must be changed drastically because war must be prevented between different nations. It is now possible for the human race to destroy itself by the means intended to make nations militarily secure, which they can no longer do, but by which they could inadvertently commit national and human race suicide. Violence within societies must also be continually reduced. Any people who remain trapped in poverty will need to escape their poverty. A fully sustainable world economy will be needed in place of those still dependent upon depleting some exhaustible resources, dangerously polluting the environment and overloading the biological systems upon which our existence as well as our economy depends. How many countries will deal well with insecurities arising in interdependent economies? How successful will the human species be in reducing people's feelings of injustices? How will we do in dealing with problems of increasing globalization and old problems of cyclical instability? The list of sectoral problems includes many that will be tough nuts to deal with well.

The record to date is not very good, to put it mildly, even for the democracies. The early paragraphs in this essay dealt with some of the reasons and the needed approach. These are problems that the future will still need to deal with more fully and more successfully, for failure on some of these would eventually bring unprecedented tragedy. We really need to deal with all the listed problems better, as well as with new ones that may arise. Let us get about it.

In all these problems the equity dimension and the economic dimension will be inseparable aspects of policy decisions, so economic philosophy is indispensable. Can we arrive democratically at one that will be adequate and can we implement it democratically? See **K 2. K 4. & L 4.**