

Fabian Tract No. 234.

A
SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY
FOR FABIANS.

Written by **ROBERT FRASER**
for the New Fabian Group.

With an introductory note by
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INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

This pamphlet is the outcome of an effort by some of the younger members of the Society, to restate for themselves the foundations of the Fabian philosophy. It is, if I may venture to say so, an admirable piece of work ; but its interest is, I think, not merely in what it has to say.

Forty years ago, the authors of *Fabian Essays* derived their outlook from Mill and Jevons ; and they were fairly certain that social problems admitted of direct and simple solutions. Mr. Fraser, and his colleagues have, it is clear, an inspiration and an outlook far more complex than the essayists. T. H. Green, Leonard Hobhouse and Mr. Tawney have all shaped their ultimate background ; and it is interesting to note the impact of Mr. and Mrs. Hammond's classic books upon their minds. I suspect, too, that Graham Wallas's *Human Nature in Politics* has given a sceptical edge to their thinking very different from the dogmatic confidence which marked the first phase of the Society's history. They are, too, far more greatly dubious whether we can hope to meet the difficulties which confront us. Mr. Fraser's cautious hypotheses are a fascinating contrast to Mrs. Besant's certitudes.

We hope that Mr. Fraser's tract is only the beginning of an effort by the new generation to investigate afresh the principles and practice of contemporary socialism. Most of its readers will, I think, agree that it is a beginning of real promise. It surveys the field of social philosophy with the right amplitude of mind. If its successors are as rich in vivid analysis the new generation of Fabians may revive the glories of the old.

H J. L.

A

Social Philosophy for Fabians.

Introduction.

Our tract is the result of group activity. Before we moved to each new point in the argument, the three or four of us met together and pooled our ideas. Ultimately a certain body of agreed principles would emerge, and this was the material upon which the draughtsman worked. And so to the end. The very early Fabians made consistent use of the group method in writing tracts, and our experience has convinced us that they were on the right road. No one who has not employed such a literary technique can realise how much the quality of the finished work owes to the co-operation of minds that has preceded it.

We address our tract to other young people who are interested in politics. It begins with a brief argument to show that the nature of the modern world demands from its inhabitants conscious attention to political issues. It then proceeds to examine the channels of opportunity open to those who desire a better world than the one in which they find themselves. It concludes by outlining a policy, the acceptance of which we believe will help to fulfil such a desire.

The Need for Political Activity.

The number of people with a natural interest in politics is small. Aristotle's observation that man is a social animal was made at a time when "social" and "political" were broadly inter-changeable terms, among the citizens of a unique city State, where direct government was still vigorously practised. It remains true that man is a social animal, but this sociality finds expression in many things that have little connection with politics.

This general failure to take part in politics is the result of many causes. Economic conditions, denying education to the common people, have fostered the tradition that politics is the preserve of rich gentlemen. Sometimes abstention from politics has been elevated into a principle. The early Christian Church taught that social and economic conditions were of no relevance against the background of the unseen world. The laissez-faire philosophy of the 19th Century disparaged political activity no less

severely, for, while it admitted the importance of external conditions, it urged that political interference could only disturb the automatic beneficence of their unhindered ordering.

The rejection of such assumptions forms the first reason for individual interest in politics. Experience and modern psychology combine to insist that the capacity to live a good life depends very intimately upon the external conditions upon which it is to be lived. No less has experience proved that it is baseless optimism to believe that these conditions will be best ordered without political control. The view we take is concise. *We believe that it is impossible to live a good life except in a good society. Certain things we regard as fundamental to a good society. These things cannot be achieved without political action.* It is difficult to live well in the foulness of slums. The rate at which housing proceeds depends upon conscious social control. The good life does not seem possible to millions unless better education is open to them than at present. Educational policy is now a political question. The price of another Great War in Europe will not be the good life, but life itself. The prevention of war is in the hands of politicians. No weight, therefore, can be conceded either to reasoning such as that of the early Christian Church, or of laissez-faire economics.

Secondly, the obligation to take part in politics derives directly from the magnitude of our present evils. These evils are so gross, their incidence so unjust, their abolition so clearly a political question, that no one can escape a share of responsibility for their persistence.

To many who read this pamphlet the world may seem a pleasant place. The same world denies to millions the first conditions of a good life. It is when this fact is gripped in the mind that citizenship begins. Each of us tends to live in a world of his own, and when that world is pleasant there is little incentive to move beyond its boundaries. Citizenship can only begin when we realise that Lambeth and the Rhondda Valley are within, and not without, the margins of the world in which we find our own meaning. This world is brutal. And this world is unjust. For while its gifts to many are the deadening grip of poverty, the insecurity that is fatal to harmony, and the dull round of labour that inhibits creativeness, to others it gives everything that wealth can bring. It satisfies whims and leaves basic needs unfulfilled. Riches are often the reward of sterile leisure, and ceaseless labour is barely the guarantee of subsistence. So bitterness is added to frustration; and the General Strike was the answer that men gave to a State that seemed to them faithless to its own purpose.

The existence of a small class of rich men, standing above the common people, is a threefold evil. It is politically harmful

because unequal property implies unequal power. Property gives a sinister access to the source of political decision. University teaching, as in America, will be controlled in the interest of its maintenance. The Press will be controlled, and so the information from which public opinion is largely born. Property is, therefore, able to pervert the State to its own end.

It is economically harmful because it will mean sectional control of policy which is universal in its interest. Profits are not an infallible symptom of social utility. The destruction of a forest, the reckless exploitation of oil-fields, the defilement of a countryside may couple private gain with social loss. Production is twisted from its social purpose, and the economic system is made to produce cake for some before it has made bread for all. And we escape from the waste of competition at the price of monopoly-profit.

It is spiritually harmful because, in concentrating control, it makes ordinary men the passive recipients of orders, and allots them a working life over the conditions and purpose of which they exercise little or no control. It makes men ambitious for money, because money means power, and contemptuous of virtue, because virtue takes orders. The gospel of Capitalism is the gospel of success. It brings society to a moral standstill by its barren insistence on the inevitability of private gain as the mainspring of production.

The result has been to give property a representation at the source of social decision that is, by democratic theory, the birthright of personality. Society has a democratic political structure beside an oligarchic economic structure, and the social consequence is a pluto-democracy.

Every evil cannot be fathered upon capitalism. There is one major evil which, although it is aggravated by capitalism, might well exist in a Socialistic or Communist state. It has its source in the vastness of society. In democratic theory sovereignty resides in the people. In practice policy is formulated at a centre from which ordinary men and women feel themselves remote. "The English people are free only at election times," and if this is true, it follows that they are free only to renew their contract of slavery. It is this realisation that has led to the devices of the referendum, the initiative and the recall. That is too simple a way of bringing the "General Will" to Westminster. None the less, it is true that democracy is only a name so long as men feel that they cannot in any intimate way impress their personality upon the course of public policy, and the organisation of popular access to the point of control is the outstanding political problem of our times.

The Instruments of Political Activity.

Such conditions deny the good life to many. Whoever wishes to alter them is faced with no light task. For the institutions we are driven to condemn still enjoy the approval of influential sections of the community, while many who wish for a new society are compelled to spend their lives sustaining the old. Those who are free to plan and finally to introduce a new order must work with the greatest possible effectiveness.

This makes group action inevitable. The modern world is so complex, the evils we have analysed so integral a part of its structure, and themselves so strongly defended by groups, that they will not yield to individual pressure.

The most powerful of such groups within the nation are the political parties. The party formation, as experience shows, is a condition of democratic government, and is at the basis of the technique of mass politics. A party aims at being the actual instrument of legislation. This aim imposes certain definite features upon its life and character. Its first need is to fight for direct influence with the electorate. It must concentrate upon organising work. It must define its attitude in simple terms over the whole range of legislation. It must take issues as they arise, from day to day, and to-morrow be ready to pass to a new issue. General elections are the chapter headings of its life.

There also exist, apart from the political parties and in various relations to them, other groups with characters of their own. They do not operate on the scale of the political parties, and therefore have not the same duties. Some are given to special and single issues, like the League of Nations Union, or the Navy League. Others are grouped around a definite social philosophy, which can be applied to devise or test legislation of various kinds. Such, for example, was the group of Benthamite radicals, who dominated legislation in the middle of the 19th century, with their criterion of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number," and their test question of every institution, "what is its use?" Such also is the Fabian Society. It was present at the birth of the Labour Party—it has never lost its identity within it. Maintaining its coherent body of doctrine, it has made its chief concern the attempt, by research and propaganda, steadily to influence legislation in the direction such a body of doctrine suggests.

Fabianism as a Doctrine.

Fabianism, as a doctrine, begins from a conviction of the value of human personality, and a belief that all men and women have an equal right to live their lives in a manner that seems to them morally good. The State exists for the individual, and the

maintenance of his rights is its first duty. Rights are the conditions which he feels necessary to the fulfilment of his best self. They should be defined in the widest manner compatible with the exercise of equal rights by others. Rights are not equal unless freedom is equal.

To equalise freedom we must equalise economic opportunity. The Liberals of last century believed that the battle for freedom would be won by the assertion of men's equality before the polling booth. It is now apparent that political freedom without economic freedom is an illusion. The freedom enjoyed by the son of a miner is not comparable to the freedom enjoyed by the son of a millionaire. Like Benthamism, Fabianism believes that the end of legislation should be the happiness of society, and that each man is broadly the best judge of his own happiness. But from such beliefs it cannot move to the Benthamite conclusion that *laissez-faire* is the essence of legislative wisdom. To argue that, since each man is the best judge of his own happiness, therefore, the less legislative interference the better, is to miss the reality of the situation. For what is of first importance to the individual is not that he should be able to judge his own happiness, but that he should be able to attain it. There is no comfort for the dispossessed in liberty of judgment without the opportunity of achievement. If, as Bentham argued, each man is to count for one, and none for more than one, then the obligation of the State is to equalise the conditions of the achievement of happiness. Benthamism fails to meet modern necessity because it means leaving untouched social and economic conditions that are a plain denial of the good life to the broad mass of the people. We do not insist upon absolute economic equality; but we do insist that there is no freedom until the present inequality is stringently reduced, and that whatever inequality is permitted to exist shall be grounded on special need or demanded by the social quality of the work performed.

This economic equality is fundamental to a just and good society, but it cannot be introduced under capitalism. It must be imposed by collective control. This implies the common control for the common good, of the means of production and distribution. Such is the core of doctrine that makes the Fabian Society a socialist body.

Fabians do not believe that revolution is a necessary preface to the world they desire to see built. They believe that the approach to a good society lies through planned and peaceful progress. When a dictatorship bars peaceful progress there may be hope in nothing but revolution. But when revolution can be avoided, it should be avoided. For revolution is not a *katharsis*. It has its defects. In the stress of revolution reason and tolerance do not flourish, and those who hold power by the sword are

reluctant to relinquish what has been so hardly won. In England the approach to the good society lies open to those who have the patience and the care to pass that way.

Collectivism seems to us desirable, not only because it permits society to distribute wealth justly, but also because the motive of private profit is neither morally adequate nor practically efficient. What may be in the interests of the few may not be in the interests of the many. We can no longer allow private profit to be the test of whether certain services be performed. The deliberate and instructed will of society must prevail in what are matters of social interest.

There is lastly in Fabianism as a doctrine the element of "expertise," the emphasis on "measurement and publicity" on careful research and adequate knowledge. The new society will not be content to test its policy by a lazy reference to financial profit and loss, and must have at its disposal the information and judgment of a responsible public service.

It is necessary to make clear the implications of this element of doctrine. Fabianism does not mean more by its insistence on the need for government by experts than that it is preferable to government by inexperts. It does not imply the superiority of the decisions of a centralised bureaucracy over the decisions of the people. It is not Fabianism, but modern government, that implies an element of bureaucracy. Fabianism is concerned that that inevitable element shall be of high quality.

We have now concluded a survey of Fabian philosophy. Fabianism, as a method of applying that philosophy, has been distinguished by three principles.

Fabianism as a Method.

First, it has spread its doctrine by selective permeation rather than by mass propaganda. It has sought to persuade the influential rather than to appeal directly to the people. This tendency was not so marked in the early days of the society, but it has increased in strength, firstly because the need for mass propaganda is now met by other bodies, and, secondly, because both by its smallness and its temperament the society is unfitted for the street corner. Nor is the policy of permeation without a less negative justification. It seems to be a fact of group life that opinions spread downward through society from those whom society accepts as its leaders. It is possible, therefore, that by directing a stream of persuasion upon the influential the society has concentrated its energy at the point of maximum return.

Secondly, Fabianism has been scientific rather than prophetic. There has never been a Fabian dogma ready to treat facts on the Procrustean principle. There has, in a sense, never been even

a Fabian orthodoxy. Fabian writers have preferred the argument of fact rather than the eloquence of inspiration, and they have often been content to leave latent the socialist position beneath the factual arguments. It is interesting to speculate to what extent this Fabian bias for facts was instrumental in freeing English socialist thought from a subjection to Communist Fundamentalism.

The principle of permeation is seen at work in the stream of influence with which the Fabian Society surrounded the House of Commons debates on housing and education at the turn of the century, and, most distinctly, in the attempt to saturate the Liberal Party with Fabianism in the years 1880—1900.

Fabian preference for facts is apparent in the character of the tracts which the society has issued since its foundation in 1883, peculiarly in the birth control statistics collected from its members in the nineties, when most other people were meeting birth control with indiscriminating denunciation or applause; and, supremely, in the Poor Law Minority Report of 1909.

These two principles of permeation and factual argument have combined to lend to the society an air of sedate competence, which has been very helpful in opening the minds of the middle class to the weight of socialist argument.

Finally, the Fabian Society has been marked by a strong and continuous interest in institutions. It has attempted to develop what has come to be called an institutional sense. Every political theorist is led to ask what his theory implies in administrative terms. For all political theories are, in an almost literal sense, pregnant with a set of institutions; and with their deliverance the philosopher must concern himself. Those who believe in socialism, for example, must discover what answer socialism gives to the demand for democracy in industry, to the problem, let us say, of delegated legislation and administrative law, of the structure of the legislature, of local government areas, and of federalism in its broadest sense. They must seek the administrative aspect of the philosophic tenet.

Such a search for institutions may lag too far behind the formulation of the political theory. In 1688 the Divine Right of an absolutist executive disappeared from English political thought. Its place was taken by a political philosophy which based government on popular consent, and asserted the responsibility of the executive to an elected legislature. But to assert responsibility was not to ensure it, and it took 100 years to discover, in the cabinet, a satisfactory institutional answer to the demand for responsibility.

So with democracy the philosophy outruns the institutions. Fabianism recognises the profound importance of discovering institutions that will be more adequate to the theory of democracy.

It seeks the translation of a political philosophy into a political structure.

We have suggested why it is that present institutions make an imperfect response to the democratic idea. The modern State is so large that policy is decided at a centre from which ordinary men and women feel remote. Few men, when decisions about which they feel passionately are about to be taken, avoid a sense of being impotently outside the circle within which the decision is reached. They meet the will of the State as though it were external to them. This seriously impoverishes the significance of democracy.

It has been a first principle of Fabianism that a central legislature alone does not fulfil the implications of democracy. It is too remote to convince men that they are actual participants in the formulation of policy. We can build institutions that will diffuse a sense of freedom more evenly through the community if we follow the two principles of permeation and consultation.

Firstly, the State must decentralise. Democracy does not mean sovereignty at the centre and obedience at the circumference. It means that decisions shall be taken by those who have a major interest in the result. There are many questions in the modern State in which the central authority has only an indirect interest, and over which it therefore needs only an indirect supervision. Fabianism, therefore, has always emphasised the civic value of a healthy system of local government.

Secondly, the State must consult. The legislature is too apt to be insulated against the interests its laws will affect. If legislation is to be more closely interwoven with public opinion it is necessary to construct for public opinion institutional access to the legislature. We need to build around the legislature a circle of advisory committees, to be associated in the process of legislation at the formative stage. Such committees could be given a formal status. They would be attached in an advisory capacity to each State department, and could be chosen partly by the Minister and partly by the various associations interested in the work of the particular department.

The two principles of decentralisation and consultation are complementary. Roughly speaking, decentralisation extends the points of political decision nearer to the people. Consultation brings the people nearer to the points of political decision. Both magnify the meaning of the individual in the modern State. Both serve to maintain what Wells has called "the best direction of human affairs with the maximum of willing co-operation."

Peroration.

We are at the end of our discussion of Fabian political philosophy, and it remains to draw the threads together into a mild peroration.

We have come to the simple conviction that real democracy has never yet existed. The State began as a power system, through which the few maintained their authority over the many, and in which the interests of the few was the actual, if not the acknowledged, end of government. From this distorted purpose no State has yet won free.

We have found that democracy is thwarted in two ways. In the first place great inequality is fatal to the purpose of the State. For it constitutes a denial of the claim of men to share equally in the formation of policy. It divides society into antagonistic groups, between which there can be no ultimate compromise. It makes impossible, therefore, that interpenetration of wills without which a true community cannot exist. A small powerful class will direct legislation towards its own interests, not because it is wicked, but because its interests are alone comprehensible to it. To identify such interests with the common good is a natural step. But democracy can have no respect for welfare so conceived. It demands the definition of social good from all those who share in the co-operative life of the community. In the second place, democracy must discover institutions that will give reality to its purpose. The will of every citizen must be relevant to the State. His personality must assume a creative part in the process of government. So we must invent institutions that will express the totality of political willing in the community.

Beneath this pamphlet there lies a dominant political belief. The State can no longer claim obedience to its laws on the ground of their origin. It must win its members by its service. It must become, to that end, an association of free men, membership in which is at least as genuine and significant as membership in any other association. But this means that political privilege must be destroyed: for otherwise the sense of membership will not extend beyond the privileged. The State must build its will from an area as wide as its boundaries. If I know that my will is neglected or discounted in the formation of policy I am not free, and my loyalty will not be won. The will of the State is richer, not poorer, by the addition to its content of the will of the humblest within it—richer because a more complete response to the whole of social experience. Such, at least, is the faith we serve.

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THE FABIAN SOCIETY

11 DARTMOUTH STREET, WESTMINSTER, LONDON, S.W.1.

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The Fabian Society has been, from the outset, a constituent body of the Labour Party; and membership of the Society carries with it full membership of the Labour Party; eligibility for nomination to all Conferences and Offices, and qualification for Labour Party candidatures for Parliament and Local Authorities, without obligation to belong to any other organisation.

The Society welcomes as members any persons, men or women, wherever resident, who subscribe to its Basis (set forth below), and who will co-operate in its work according to their opportunities.

BASIS OF THE FABIAN SOCIETY.

(TO BE SIGNED BY ALL MEMBERS.)

(Adopted May 23rd, 1919.)

The Fabian Society consists of Socialists.

It therefore aims at the reorganisation of Society by the emancipation of Land and Industrial Capital from individual ownership, and the vesting of them in the community for the general benefit. In this way only can the natural and acquired advantages of the country be equitably shared by the whole people.

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The Society is a constituent of the Labour Party and of the International Socialist Congress; but it takes part freely in all constitutional movements, social, economic and political, which can be guided towards its own objects. Its direct business is (a) the propaganda of Socialism in its application to current problems; (b) investigation and discovery in social, industrial, political and economic relations; (c) the working out of Socialist principles in legislation and administrative reconstruction; (d) the publication of the results of its investigations and their practical lessons.

The Society, believing in equal citizenship of men and women in the fullest sense, is open to persons irrespective of sex, race or creed, who commit themselves to its aims and purposes as stated above, and undertake to promote its work.

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