

DRUGGÉD INDIVIDUALISM

BY ERNEST BOYD

IN A country where so much has been achieved through large-scale production and standardization it is natural that there should be an almost nostalgic insistence upon the virtues of individualism. As the period grows more remote when the conditions of American life brought individual effort and enterprise to the fore, there is an increasing tendency to substitute the legend for reality, to employ the language of another age for the expression of ideals no longer attainable. Individualism that once was rugged is now druggéd, drugged with the heady vapors of a terminology that becomes more and more meaningless as the circumstances which inspired it change. The process of emerging from this hypnosis, like that of shaking off the effects of any drug, is unpleasant, and it is not rendered any less so by the fact that one is immediately brought face to face with the realities from which one wanted to escape.

The mark of the druggéd individualist is his inability to comprehend the rôle of the state in modern civilization; he lives on in the dream that this is a pioneering era whose needs can best be fulfilled by leaving as much as is humanly possible to private enterprise. When a nation occupies a territory so vast as the United States, this collective sense of the state as the embodiment of the national will is often merely embryonic. It is not easy to feel patriotic about half a hemisphere in the same degree as one can feel patriotic about

a limited, homogeneous area, such as nature and history have allotted to all other Western democracies. Local loyalties, therefore, are more real than national loyalties, since men are naturally devoted to that soil in which they have their roots. The New Englander's roots are not in the South, nor are the Southerner's in the West. The Federal tie is abstract rather than concrete, as is evidenced by setting the capital of the United States in a District artificially created for the purpose. There is no doubt as to the power of the Federal government to command and receive the loyalty of every American citizen in times of national crisis. But the emotional quality of that loyalty must necessarily differ from that of smaller nations in similar circumstances.

The fact that America has so rapidly and recently advanced from the status of a small pioneering country to that of the most influential of the first-class powers helps to preserve the illusions of the druggéd individualist, since it seems only yesterday that all the slogans and catchwords which beguile him were true. Every modern industrial country has undergone profound changes in the last hundred years, but elsewhere the evolution of the idea of the state, the building up of the social organism has been gradual, so that the older nations have been more prepared to accept that relationship towards the state which is nowadays essential. Only in America is government service regarded

as an inferior occupation, as tantamount to a confession of failure, or of lack of ambition, at least. Where other peoples are proud to serve their country by accepting government employment, America shows her deep-seated indifference to the state by rendering such employment both socially and financially unattractive. Why it should be ignominious for the best brains in the country to be drawn into the Civil Service, that is, into the service of the state, only the druggéd individualist can tell. Let us listen to one.

A short while ago, Mr. Mark Sullivan was reported as bemoaning the fact that the young men coming out of college who consult him as to their careers are losing hope of "attaining success by individual enterprise," owing to the "regimentation" of business under the New Deal. The deplorable prospect of giving their talents in the service of the state, instead of going into business and making money, provokes in Mr. Sullivan these reflections:

The youths who have come to me for advice this year have been puzzled and troubled in spirit. I should say that hardly one young man in ten, so long as he remains young, really likes the notion of a government career. Instinctively he feels that it is a little stifling, that it has the depressing quality of routine and regimentation, that its main recommendation is permanence and security. By instinct the larger number of normal young men prefer the competition that goes with careers in private business, the greater element of adventure and the chance, not possible in government careers, of really striking material success and reward.

Mr. Sullivan then proceeded to enlarge upon the subject by pointing out that "as surely as human beings are divided physically between blondes and brunettes" so surely are they divided between individualists by nature and collectivists by nature. This division he calmly defined as "those

who instinctively prize independence and those who instinctively prefer supervision." And his conclusion was that America's choice between the individualist and the collectivist way of life will be determined by whichever of these two temperaments dominates. Holding up Lindbergh as the perfect type of triumphant individualism, he declared that there are "some millions of Lindberghs. There are a score in every village, hundreds in every town, thousands in every city," men who "were diligent in work and ambitious in spirit, who by character and personality impressed themselves on older men, who were thereby able to borrow money and get credit, and who came to the top of their respective lines in their respective communities."

II

All the fallacies of druggéd individualism are beautifully displayed in these quotations. There is, first of all, the gratuitous insinuation that young men should have no desire to serve the state, that the Civil Service is a sort of asylum for the disabled and incompetent and aged, with its corollary that profit-making is the first and highest ideal of youth. Then comes the misleading suggestion that anyone has ever proposed that everybody is equipped for government service, and that the natural differences of human temperament should be obliterated in one vast routine bureaucracy. Very adroitly the sense of collective duty is branded as a preference for "supervision," while the slow, onerous, and frequently subservient stages of a business career are glowingly described as "independence." The professions which are not primarily chosen for gain seem to be ignored, unless one is to assume that every activity outside a government department is "business,"—a very sweeping assumption. In conclusion, of course, comes the inevi-

table "success story" of the village lad who made good, Lindbergh being a veritable godsend for the purposes of argument in these times of universal depression, with the American figures of unemployment in the neighborhood of 10,000,000.

In citing such exploits as that of Lindbergh the druggéd individualist implies, without daring to say so explicitly, that an individual of this type would be completely discouraged if in the service of the government. Yet, one seems to have heard of aviators who have flown the Atlantic and undertaken other comparable flights while members of the army, navy or air forces of their respective countries. Even under the dictatorship of Mussolini, Balbo and his armada managed to accomplish a remarkable task without having to borrow money from skeptical business men to finance the undertaking. Balbo's initiative was not stifled by bureaucracy, nor has he since been used as a catspaw by airline promoters. If, as Mr. Sullivan says, Lindbergh's spirit of rugged enterprise so deeply impressed those who advanced him the money for his flight, it is curious that he arrived in Paris so disarmingly unconscious of this backing that he was astonished at not being called upon to identify himself by means of letters of introduction. He clearly left America in ignorance of the proud confidence he is now alleged to have inspired.

Whenever the profit-making motive lands our rugged individualists in disaster, then they are only too eager for government assistance, just as they are at all times ready to use the knowledge and information which the work of various government departments places at their disposal for the further exploitation of the public whose taxes pay for these departments. When the slogan is raised: "Keep the government out of business"—this invariably

means, either that an attempt is being made to protect consumers, or that, as a result of pioneering and foresighted government expenditure, new sources of money-making have been opened up, as in the case of Boulder Dam. Why, one naturally wonders, is this precious spirit of individual, private initiative never in evidence when any project is afoot which promises benefits to the community as a whole, but only a very moderate profit in actual cash? Can it be that this boasted individualism, without which, we are told, this country will go to the dogs, is essentially none other than plain commercial greed?

This suspicion is confirmed by the history of business as contrasted with governmental enterprise. While it is conceded that many great fortunes have been made and are maintained by methods based upon something more than "diligence in work" and "ambition in spirit," as these terms are commonly understood, it is always the practice to dwell with vast pride on the success story in all its variants. The effect of success of this kind on character is never discussed, nor the question as to whether the victor in the struggle is a finer human being, a more civilized asset to the community as a result of his gratifying bank balance. Yet, it may well be that a country too thoroughly imbued with crude mercantilist philosophy, a nation of bagmen, cannot survive in a world which is growing increasingly collectivized. Whatever illusions on this score may haunt the dreams of our druggéd individualists, every great industrial nation in the world, except America, is only too well aware that the present is not a simple pioneer period in history, nor one whose problems can be met in terms of Eighteenth Century radicalism.

Yet, whenever anybody condescends to disentangle druggéd individualism from

the mere profiteering motive and to expound the philosophical background of this point of view, nothing emerges save this confusion of Eighteenth Century ideology and pioneering conditions. Thus Representative James M. Beck at the Calvin Coolidge anniversary exercises:

The Constitution is the greatest charter of individualism in the annals of the world, and under it our government, once one of the smallest nations in the world, became the master state of the world.

Certainly we built up in little more than a century, a civilization greater in diffused comfort, in equal conditions and general happiness than any other nation. We shared this mighty spirit of individual initiative with our English forbears, and it is humiliating to recall that today the people of England have retained to a greater extent the spirit of individual initiative, and as a consequence are farther advanced on the way to recovery from a world depression than we, who have in the last twelve months substituted a stupendous and unprecedented Federal bureaucracy for the initiative of the individual.

Here is the frank admission that America has far transcended the rôle foreseen by the Founding Fathers and long since passed beyond the stage of a small pioneering country. Yet, the only remedy proposed is that the government should ignore both these vital facts and revert to methods which have been proved so injurious that the only further demonstration can be to prove them ruinous. A "stupendous Federal bureaucracy" may be "unprecedented," but that does not prove that it is not desirable. The growth of America is also stupendous and unprecedented, so why should not stupendous and unprecedented methods be singularly appropriate? Mr. Beck, it will be noted, ignores the possibility that a bureaucracy, that is, the servants of the state, can have any other function than to be obstructive. If it is incompetent, if it is

obstructive, if it is dishonest—why not improve it, why not devote the time wasted on advocating impotent "individualism" to building up the prestige of the public service, to making it more worthy and representative of the community?

Nevertheless, Mr. Beck extols the individual initiative of England, from which he derives the American variety. Yet, bureaucracy in Britain has functioned for generations on the very scale that the drugged individualists denounce. There the best brains of the universities and public schools are drawn upon by the state for the army, navy and Civil Service. No young Englishman would understand Mr. Mark Sullivan's theory that government employment is the refuge of spineless creatures who are afraid of responsibility. Bureaucrats most efficiently administer services which do not even exist in this country, as they administer others which are a source of profit to the nation as a whole, whereas here those same services benefit chiefly and extravagantly those rugged individualists who happen to be large stockholders. The result of that British individual initiative which Mr. Beck so rightly admires is that the government can call upon as highly competent, as well equipped, and as experienced a group of experts in their various fields as has ever been produced even by the most generous money rewards offered by American business.

III

The advantage of attracting first-rate men into the service of the state is obvious both in foreign and domestic affairs, but drugged individualists are still convinced that money-making is the only worthy objective of man, even when making a bare living is becoming more and more hazard-

ous. The result is that, when men of genuine ability accept Federal appointments, they very soon succumb to the persistent, all-pervasive, anti-government propaganda, and are lured into private business by monetary and other considerations. They are richer for the exchange, Uncle Sam the poorer, so much so that, in emergencies, the government has to borrow qualified men from business, whereas other nations maintain their services, civil, military, and navy, in such a fashion that a man would feel as disgraced in abandoning them for trade as any soldier or sailor would feel disgraced if he started huckstering and bargaining for better terms, before going into battle.

"The individualist," said Mr. Beck, in the address from which I have quoted "is a citizen who first creates and then controls his government. The collectivist is a subject who surrenders his own judgment to the arbitrary dictates of a governmental bureaucracy." The exact opposite of this is the case. A collectivist first creates and then controls his own government, thereby controlling his own bureaucracy. An individualist of the drugged variety surrenders his own judgment to the arbitrary slogans and politicians, thereby losing control of his own government. Mistrust of the state, bordering on an almost total misconception of its functions in the modern world, is illustrated by this striking distortion of the meaning of "collectivist," which by definition involves an active belief in the use of government for collective purposes, *i.e.*, for the benefit of all. This is described as "surrender," just as the service of the state is called a desire for "supervision," and the endless kowtowings, concessions, and servilities of the business world are fondly referred to as "independence."

One would imagine that, at least since the crash of 1929, the precise limitations of

our anti-bureaucratic exemplars of private enterprise and individual initiative had become such a matter of universal knowledge, and often contempt, that it would be impossible to argue seriously that such leaders are reliable guides in national affairs. The most incompetent bureaucrats in history have never been shown up to worse advantage, while few of similar rank, standing, and responsibility have been convicted of such ruthless indifference to the public welfare, on the one hand, and of such childish helplessness and ignorance, on the other, in precisely those matters in which public confidence had vested them with complete and untrammelled authority. Yet, we find Representative Beck declaring that, "if men at times make mistakes, and all do, their mistakes are not as great or so harmful as those of the typical bureaucrat. . . . If the individual makes a mistake, it is his own error and he suffers accordingly, but if the bureaucracy makes a mistake, the individual suffers for something for which he is not responsible."

Here, again, we note the familiar technique of the drugged individualist in argument. There are two false assumptions. The first is that, when a government official blunders, he does not pay the consequences. The second is that, when the industrial and financial masterminds misled the country with bad advice and wholly fallacious prognostications, when they continued, after the crash, to misinterpret or misrepresent the facts, they alone paid the penalty, that their mistakes were less harmful and of less importance than those of a government department. Yet, statistics based on Dun's *Review*, on October 17, 1931, quoted the amount of liabilities in failures as \$332,425,638, \$473,043,174, and \$531,776,004, for the years 1929, 1930, and 1931 respectively. In December, 1929, the rugged individualism of the National City Bank found ex-

pression in the statement that "there are no great failures nor are there likely to be." In the spring of 1931 the equally rugged individualism of Andrew W. Mellon assured the Congress of the International Chamber of Commerce that reductions in wages would be avoided "at all costs."

A couple of months later he reduced the wages of all employes of the Aluminum Company of America by 10%. In fact, during those years of acute crisis, the stream of childish platitudes and evasive untruths was so promptly and regularly contradicted by the facts that Senator Simeon D. Fess had to confess indignantly that "every time an Administration official gives out an optimistic statement about business conditions, the market immediately drops." This, the druggéd individualist declared, was all because of a concerted effort to discredit President Hoover.

No bureaucracy could have been more helpless or more costly to the country than these exponents of private enterprise and initiative proved themselves and were proven to be. The only difference is that, however competent or incompetent, the bureaucrat is not out for personal gain; by the very nature of his position he has renounced money-making to devote his abilities to the public service. Whatever the anti-brain trusters may say about "professors," the latter do not, as a rule, so conduct themselves as to merit such criticism as that recently published by the Senate Banking Committee: "Many of the abuses have resulted from the incompetence, negligence, irresponsibility or cupidity of individuals in the profession." Cupidity is a powerful factor in the career of the rugged individualist. It is automatically eliminated from a first-class Civil Service. It is incredible that politicians and publicists can still continue to argue as if the choice lay

between a wasteful, extravagant, ineffectual bureaucracy and the shrewd, foresighted and self-sacrificing men of affairs. As the Senate Banking Committee's report pointed out:

Despite the grave responsibility which his fiduciary position imposed upon him, the investment banker took no steps to curb the speculative fervor which swept over the investors in his field from 1926 to 1929. On the contrary, he was content to float new issues as long as the investing public was willing and able to absorb them, regardless of the inevitable consequences.

The colossal loss sustained by the public on bond issues sponsored by the investment bankers manifests that those bankers were either incompetent or derelict in the performance of their duties.

Rugged individualists all! No wonder, when times are good, that they want the government to keep its hands off business.

IV

One might continue indefinitely citing cases to prove that government servants are not necessarily incompetent and unenterprising, and that private enterprise and initiative are not always to the advantage of the community. A vast number of services of all kinds are collectivized, more in some countries than in others, and they are as efficiently conducted as those in the hands of private ownership. The point is that, whether efficiently or inefficiently managed, their aim is not profits but the public welfare. Inefficiency and even downright dishonesty in business can exist as well as honesty and fair play. In neither case does the community benefit as it would under public ownership. In this country the legend persists from pioneering times, and is carefully cultivated for obviously interested reasons, that public ownership is always and everywhere bad,

and that the faintest approach to government control should be resisted as an attack on the liberty of the people.

The result is that there is less public ownership in America than in the other great Western democracies. In fact, nothing that can conceivably show a profit has been left to the government, State or Federal, although many services could be more economically performed by one or another of these agencies. For historical and geographical reasons, the American sense of the state is more embryonic than that of other nations, and expresses itself differ-

ently. The question, therefore, arises as to whether, in the crisis through which civilization is passing today, America can afford to indulge in the daydreams of drugged individualism, that is, individualism based upon outworn phrases and having no relation to the realities of contemporary industrial and economic conditions. Collectivism has made the army and the navy of the United States. Why should the spirit that inspires it be anathema? It also, by the way, built the Panama Canal, after the scandalous and ignominious failure of private, profiteering enterprise.

AMERICAN PLAYS IN ENGLAND

BY IVOR BROWN

IT is sometimes suggested that American plays on English stages start under handicap of prejudice. The English playgoer, according to this view, is intrinsically a nationalist, although he professes himself to be the owner of cosmopolitan appetites. He does not loudly announce his resentment against imported drama (he would be more honest if he did), but he effectively shows that resentment by abstention from the box office when American goods are on sale. He sniffs at gangster plays on the one hand and he refuses to acknowledge Eugene O'Neill as a master. Why, to clinch the argument, even during the summer of 1934, two New York successes, the roaring farce "She Loves Me Not" and the melodrama "The Dark Tower" had to be withdrawn hurriedly. The Englishman really is a stiff-necked, self-centred, self-complacent fellow, jealous of all offerings that are not tied up in red, white and blue ribbon.

That allegation of instinctive hostility to American plays is, I am convinced, false. There have been times, be it admitted, when a surfeit of trans-oceanic crook plays has evoked some bitterness from theatrical gossip-writers; but, as Americans know perfectly well, gossip-writers have a professional duty to be pert; from the pert to the sour and the spiteful is no long distance. If they cannot sharpen their nibs, they are deemed to be dull fellows and go in danger of dismissal. Vinegar in print sells better than the milk of human kind-

ness. At the same time I would submit that London theatrical journalism, both in its news-paragraphs and in its criticism, is infinitely gentler than are its New York parallels.

As far as foreign artists are concerned welcome is ample and ungrudging. In the London summer season of 1934 the conspicuous successes were Elizabeth Bergner, Austrian Jewess; the Lunts, Anglo-American combination in an American play, Robert Sherwood's "Reunion in Vienna"; and Miss Ina Claire, American actress in an American play, Behrman's "Biography." Drury Lane, which might be regarded as the home of the national theatrical tradition and high temple of Union Jackass, has housed a musical piece by Oscar Hammerstein II and Jerome Kern with Charlotte Greenwood as comedy star; all are Americans. The prejudice theory receives no assistance here. But one can see how it arises. A play, which has triumphed in America, happens to fail in England. It was known to be a good thing and it has been received with cold disfavor. What other conclusion can there be for the disappointed manager, author, and company than a vote of censure on English unwillingness, or at least on English inability, to appreciate the alien offering?

But anybody who knows the theatre can immediately refute such argument. The theatre is not a place where logical results are to be expected; it is a roulette-board where people can lose without reason and