

THE NEEDS OF POLITICS AND THE NEEDS OF SOCIETY

Frederick C. Thayer

We have been reading for some time that the Nixon Administration has abandoned its "low profile" approach in favor of harsh rhetoric that divides us into "polarized" camps, with Attorney General Mitchell and Vice-President Agnew singled out as the principal culprits. As this is written, it is too early to tell if the President's attempt to overcome the reaction to his Cambodian decision is the beginning of a long-term restoration of a "cooler" approach or is merely an interlude between Agnewisms. In any case, the President's original words about the necessity to listen to each other struck a happy note, and it is equally the case that productive exchanges of views seem most difficult to achieve in this society. Why?

In reflecting upon this question and in watching the clash of interests and rhetoric in a major urban area, I am led almost inevitably to an unhappy conclusion: the needs of the political process we prize seem to run counter to the needs of society. I use "society" to describe any human community, not merely to encompass a particular political unit. Political theories and processes rank quite high, however, and we tend to apply them to many forms of organizational life—as with Robert's Rules of Order. Both the theories and the processes may have outlived their usefulness and, if that is so, new substitutes are badly needed. Let me illustrate the argument by detailing some of the needs of politics and society.

Politics: The Dichotomy of "Winners" and "Losers." In politics the major rule is out of Vincent Lombardi by the Green Bay Packers; "winning is everything, not merely the name of the game." It follows that almost anything is permissible if the purpose is accomplished. We may have graduated from the stuffing of ballot boxes, the voting of tombstone electors, and the buying of votes with cash on the line, but I wonder if we have abandoned the underlying philosophies. Do modern techniques for getting

out the vote really hold the individual in any higher esteem? All of us watch in dismay as campaigners release simplistic assertions, outrageous distortions, and dangerous venom. It is even a principle enshrined in law that public figures, by virtue of that fact alone, are not to be spared hideous attack in public. The results are uniformly bad at all levels.

The individual voter responds in one of two major ways. He can become totally aroused, and he votes principally "against" a candidate instead of "for" the opponent. Swept up in the emotional euphoria of the process, he accepts the notion that this is how *all* major questions should be decided. He concludes that social progress comes only through the raising of tempers and the imposition of defeat upon others. To be "committed" is to adopt this sort of life style and all of its silly trappings, including the ceremony of unconditional surrender (concession) shortly after polls close. He can, on the other hand, remain largely apathetic, even in the face of reminders that it is his solemn duty as a citizen to cast his vote. If he is reasonably conscientious he does, but he then concludes that he has fulfilled his obligations to society and that he has no further need to participate.

The candidate for office is no better off. He must create heat and hate. He must master the techniques which persuade voters to shout, to react, but not to reason, for the task is to get them to vote—even if they know not why. Not so many years ago the principal technique was to jam thousands into sports arenas, then arrange for them to shout appropriate slogans. Today we see clever packaging of television spot appearances, and we see the phenomenon openly termed "crowd politics." The candidate "presses the flesh" of hundreds, or he stands on automobiles surrounded by huge crowds. This creates a mystical and mysterious relationship between candidate and crowd—one which often does not include even a speech.

Somewhere between the voter and the candidate stands the political party. Its only purpose is to win elections, and so it imposes harsh demands upon its permanent members. They are expected to subordinate long-term objectives (the solving of societal problems) to short-term ones (the winning

Dr. Thayer teaches at the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public and International Affairs.

of the next election). In Taft's phrase, "the duty of the opposition is to oppose," and those who do not are criticized for it. But the situation is much worse than that.

As it looks to the next election, the political party has little choice but to try to preserve the situation which produced victory at the last election. Thus the party becomes the most stultifying organization around; not only does it cling to the rhetoric which won the last election, but it tends to approach every question concerning newly aroused constituencies exclusively in the light of the impact upon future elections.

In addition to voter, candidate, and party, a word should be said about the professional public servant who operates at any level of government. The political process encourages him to look upon himself as someone who stands "above" the individual citizen who depends upon him for certain services. We assume, incorrectly and unfortunately, that we influence and control administrators only by voting for or against their political superiors in scheduled elections. It is easy to see why this arrangement doesn't work very well.

Administrators and clients of public organizations face an infinite number of precise issues and problems every day, all of them demanding some sort of resolution. On a random basis, only a few of these issues may figure in a particular election. The elected official is unlikely to aggressively pursue change within the bureaucratic structure, for it promises no certain political rewards. More to the point, how can we expect a few elected officials to control every detail of complex administrative processes? Almost by default, professional administrators are almost totally uncontrolled. There is no sustained pressure on them to negotiate with clients, for theory prescribes they "take orders" from above; yet nobody can issue all the orders. Indeed, our political theories go much further, for to negotiate individual agreements with clients is to engage in "corruption."

Our cherished political theories and processes, then, create unnecessary and often untimely emotional confrontation, perpetuate hate-creating party structures, and explicitly avoid solutions to individual problems. The only objective is the gaining of office, and that is the beginning and end of any definition of "winners" and "losers." The principal villain, I conclude with sorrow, is the electoral process itself, for it cannot proceed without polarization.

Society: Everyone Must Participate and Win. In-

creasing evidence is available on what is needed for the effective management of human affairs. In theory and practice we are learning that human problems can be solved only by organizations carefully designed to include all of the interests affected by the issue. I use "organizations" in the broadest sense, to include all levels of officialdom, all formal or informal members, all clients, and all others whom the organization might affect. We see the phenomenon at work every day in all walks of life. We know now that major projects within the country, whether in urban areas or elsewhere, can be put together only when all interests are recognized. National, state, and local officials must come together with people who represent many other interests, and they must interact with each other, conduct a constant dialogue, maintain a *continuous process* of confronting and solving problems until the major objective is achieved. Notice carefully the word "confrontation." In this usage individuals and interests confront *issues* and *questions*, not each other.

Lest this sound like a description of a world in which only highly paid professionals operate, I add that the worker who performs the most routinized job imaginable also must be encouraged to participate in decision processes which affect his working environment. Yes, this does indeed mean that in retrospect the pattern that grew up around the labor movement does not help us very much. Not only does it depend almost entirely upon emotional confrontation, but it is not continuous enough. The minute a situation arises that is not covered by existing contracts, work stoppages occur until a revised agreement is worked out. The system restricts individual participation to voting on contract terms and, because contractual issues are at stake, it prevents individual participation by the worker.

We know now that problem-solving environments demand sensitivity and empathy on the part of all those involved. The objective is to reach a solution to which all can agree, in which everyone achieves something no matter how little, in which each participant accepts the outcome because he has received a fair hearing. Each restrains emotional reactions because he knows that the process will continue the next day and he will have another chance to be more successful.

Perhaps the single most important aspect of such processes is their egalitarian, nonhierarchical atmosphere. We are only beginning to learn that while we have established equality as our guiding principle of politics, we have sacrificed it to the alleged necessity of hierarchical organizations which "get things done." Thus, the notion of hierarchical auth-

ority has permeated all organized activities, including political ones. We demand "leadership," "control," "direction," and "command," when no such arrangement is needed at all.

What is emerging, then, are new notions of democratic processes. Fast disappearing are notions of authoritarian behavior, charismatic leadership, hierarchical relationships, and clear lines of command and control. Something is happening which recognizes the "wholeness" of the individual in ways we have not known before.

What Can We Do? What lies ahead of us is a long, slow, and very painful transformation. What we must seek is a society which solves most of its major problems outside the political process as we know it. This requires as a first step that we either transform our current theories of democracy or downgrade them in importance. An enormous cobweb of confusion needs untangling.

Many of our most concerned citizens, especially young ones, are committing all of their energies to the task of gaining *control* of society. Indeed, we have taught ourselves that the attainment of power must come first, so why should we be surprised? Thus, any tactics or allies are acceptable, provided the battle is won. We see citizens turning to Che Guevara, Castro, even Mao, as fellow-enemies of our own Establishment, easily forgetting that the political theories and processes we know (it doesn't matter whether one excludes or includes revolution) merely substitute one Establishment for another. We must distinguish, then, between those who see themselves as a new power elite and those who really are demanding some form of participation in decision processes but who see no way to create them within our political system. To satisfy the demand, the crucial one in my estimation, we must create, emphasize and, most important of all, *use* new processes which seem quite strange to most of us at this time.

The changes of which I speak must be fundamental. We must discard the comforting notion that we can get by with the necessary evils of electoral processes, provided only that we solve peripheral problems by limiting campaign expenditures, altering broadcast regulations, restructuring convention delegations, and suppressing overt corruption. While I do not see the complete removal of elections as feasible, they simply must be sharply downgraded in importance, and elected officials simply must become more symbolic than operational.

We have an enormous advantage in this society, for we are a literate society. There is every reason

to assume and to believe that the individual citizen can indeed negotiate with public officials concerning the services and resources due him. It does not startle me to speculate on the possibility of having clients write efficiency reports on professional administrators instead of relying upon "superior" officials who cannot understand the environment within which subordinate administrators must function. The age of pretense is disappearing; people are demanding to be brought into decision processes, and it simply must be done.

We need at all levels of government entirely new processes and mechanisms for taking into account the views and perceptions of interested citizens and organizations, and for incorporating those into the decision processes *before* decisions are made. The new processes will have to be fluid, subject to change almost daily, as citizens and groups decide what issues are important enough to warrant their time and energy. To those who shout "Impossible!" I ask only what further proof is needed nowadays to convince you that we cannot afford to exclude those demanding to be heard? Further, why assume that people brought inside the process always will reach the "wrong" decisions?

The new processes will involve most of the important decisions made in society, for the going rule will be that decisions are made *when* they are needed. If decisions are made only on the basis of including affected individuals and groups in the decision process, then elections will become progressively unimportant. It will matter much less who is symbolically "in charge," for the incumbent officeholder will hold no license to exclude anyone. Negotiations, discussions, conclusions will center on issues, not power and, hopefully, not personalities. Power, indeed, will be highly diffused, and that is as it should be. The image of the decisive public executive will be assigned to the appropriate ashcan.

I agree that all of this sounds utopian, highly idealistic, extraordinarily difficult of achievement. It doubtless will sound subversive to those who prize the democratic system currently at work. True enough, the system is more democratic than most of those in the world at large, but that is no answer. Those who are shouting the loudest are trying to tell us something, even if they are confused themselves. The system, whatever its virtues, is *not democratic enough*. Why not frankly admit it, grasp the obvious marriage of politics and polarization, and do something about it?