

a prescription for a democratic society

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The social system of the United States, though full of movement, seems empty of direction. The mood of the public appears to alternate between weariness and restlessness. Indeed, the entire scene suggests an image of a dispirited carousel whose riders are advisedly preparing to get off—people and mechanism clearly out of joint.

We are a wealthy economy that is not feeding the hungry, a great technology that is not cleaning its atmosphere, even a great military power that is not winning at war—a great society, in short, with many crying needs and the apparent resources to meet them, but without the political thrust to forge the necessary connectives between wants and fulfillment.

So far, even massive public frustration has not been able to convert pleas into policies. The people replaced Johnson with Nixon and six months later nobody in public office seemed to understand exactly what this meant. What we must need is some better method to establish for our policy-makers a clear set of signals *requiring* certain actions—a substitution of precise prescriptions for vague dissatisfaction. I suggest, therefore, a general plan for giving the American public the means to pronounce and establish a “rational order of priorities.” This rational order of priorities will result from methods (to be described later) which will help the public clarify for itself and for its public servants what it truly

wants, and what it wants *first*. Lacking any such mandate of ordered priorities, public policy tends to hover unimaginatively around the status quo. The public's demands tend to get lost in the intricate machinery of our political system.

As things work now, we are presented with the spectacle of President Nixon running after defense abroad and law and order at home, while fifty governors and hundreds of mayors are running after so many different things, in so many different directions, that nobody can possibly determine any starting or finish lines. People selected from the same party (like Nixon, Rockefeller, and Lindsay) want mutually exclusive things. The people elected from presumably different parties are often indistinguishable from their opponents. The public is, therefore, understandably confused. It displays its alienation by an apathetic and often inconsistent voting record and a mood that ranges from indifference to hostility.

Now, an alienated, hostile, indifferent public is not in good shape to serve as a beacon in an area where a beacon is clearly necessary. It is not the stuff of which leadership is made. Yet the system requires leadership. Our American Constitutional system, however, thwarts the leadership institutions that generally serve this end in most countries. Here in the United States our executives, legislatures, courts, and parties are all held in thrall by a constitutional system of countervailing “checks and balances.” Executives check legislatures, courts check both, and vice versa all around. We also have a “marble-cake” type of federalism in which policy runs through all layers of the government (national, state, and local) in a haphazard and unpredictable manner. Add to this our cumbersome committee operations, our frustrating filibusters, and “2/3 majorities”; our prolix legalistic procedures; and finally our decentralized and undisciplined party system. The net effect of all these practices is to drive an unwieldy wedge between the constituency and the delivery of a responsive program.

It is because of this that I suggest a return to the people, in a meaningful manner. The American public has been responding to the social and economic environment not with power, but with a singularly childlike petulance. We substitute rage for reason, querulous complaint for critical command. And we are encouraged in this behavior (manipulated, if you

will) by those public officials who need to mask their own failures, and their own inabilities to resolve complex and distasteful choices. The primary objective for the politician has been election; for the bureaucrat it has been promotion. Both objectives have been better served by obscuring issues than by clarifying them.

This is not to accuse the seven million or so officials who serve us of corruption—or even of bad intentions. It is merely to point out that they are human and will therefore act primarily out of self-interest and a well-developed survival sense. After all, they really do not have any mathematical “formula” that will help them choose between a school and a hospital when there is a demonstrable need for both. For them to make such a choice would indeed be suicidal.

The notion, moreover, that there are available scientifically programmed decisions for basic policies is one that must itself be carefully examined. In the final analysis, I am afraid that this too is a deceit. Even an excruciating zero-sum wargame like Vietnam does not yield to this presumed scientific calculus. In a recent evaluation, the *New York Times* reported in distressing detail the decision-making apparatus than finally begot first an *acceleration* policy and later a *deceleration* policy in this volatile situation. If expertise can move in equal and opposite directions, we must be ready to accept the ultimately limited role that machines, data analysts, and other sophisticated devices can play. In the end, the decision between two mutually exclusive policies had to be made by a lonely man who leaned upon the slender reed of his pollsters' assessments of an apparently fickle, uninformed, and presumably unintelligent public.

There are no scientific certainties and no military or political pundits who can supply surefire answers. Elected representatives would surely like to operate with less uncertainty than now prevails. They would, I believe, like to know how to interpret their democratic “mandates”—if only to insure their future reelection. And administrators too would feel more secure if they had *clear policy* directives. I would like to suggest, therefore, that we bring this direction-setting task back to where it belongs in a democracy. Back to the people—back to the electorate.

Here, then, we begin to run into grist from the mills of the political

analysts who have studied the electorate and who have harsh things to say about it.

They say, for example, that with close to 100 million potential voters, even the “hottest” presidential election fails to bring out as much as 65% of the electorate. Obviously, something is very wrong with such people. Most social scientists pin their findings on the social and psychological factors that appear to influence voting—that is, the limitations of an average man's intelligence, attention span, motivational apparatus, and general psyche. What blame does not fall here is placed on the complexities of the problems that face us. The American public emerges from these voting studies as an ill-informed, irrational people with reasonably strong attachments to one or another of our major political parties, but with little or no ideological understanding, little or no information on issues, and a highly inconsistent and illogical set of voting responses.

Yet virtually every exploration that produces these unflattering profiles turns on elections in which the voter *simply chooses between one or more persons*. The relatively few instances in which the voter has had a chance to look at *issues* occur only at the state and local level, in a mist of relative obscurity, and in a style that would make *Beowulf* look like a primer. In these elections there is no panoply of resources expended to inform and sway the public—as there is in the personality contests. The few situations in the 22 states that use mandatory or optional referenda have, to date, been relatively unexplored. The data on hand is sketchy and incomplete. As far as it does go, however, it in no way proves the incompetence of American voters. Quite the contrary! It appears that when the public is asked to say something about *policy* in arenas where they know that the outcome of their decisions will result in direct action, they behave consistently, vigorously, and even sensibly.

We come, then, to my belief that the political theorists of our time (and the political computers) should busy themselves with refining a system for the people of this country to use in establishing what I have chosen to call a “Rational Order of Priorities.” The general shape of the system I envision would be a national referendum held every four years—at the same time as the presidential election. The voter would face a

computer-adapted ballot in his election machine that would offer a list of all ongoing major social policy areas. These categories would correspond to what our public budgets generally use: that is, Defense, Health Services, Education, Housing, Programs for Eradicating Poverty, Internal Public Safety, Transportation, Environmental Protection, Recreation and Culture, Administration of Justice, and Development of the Economy. The voter would be asked to “rank” these items by numbering them from one to eleven in the order in which the voter believes they ought to be funded. The voters would be informed that all of the public budgets with which he lives would reflect his voting choices in terms of the proportions of money to be allocated among the general fields listed above. Such items as “debt service,” and “general government administration” will be deducted prior to any allocations, along with a 10% “emergency fund.”

The method of counting the votes would provide for totals to be tabulated on a nation-wide basis, a state-wide basis, and a city-wide basis (or town or village). This will permit the continued operation of our pluralistic decision centers and will mean, in effect, that those public moneys to be expended in the United States as a whole will follow national returns; North Dakota budgets will follow the preference ratings of North Dakotans. Since the categories are broad, considerable executive and administrative flexibility is still retained. Nor would this system emasculate our legislative bodies. They too would continue to function in a traditional manner, setting forth *specific* policies and allocating *specific* budgetary amounts among and within the basic categories. All that will have happened is that the public will have been forced to act *responsibly* and the elected officials will have been forced to act *responsively*.

As in any new enterprise, we must be prepared for problems and subsequent revisions. To those who would say that the public is not equipped for such decisions, I must reply that no single individual is better equipped to make choices among *values* than is the electorate as a whole. Were this postulate untrue, then the entire logic of democracy would be undone. There is no scientific proof for the validity of “value judgments” and this leads inexorably to the arguments for the free marketplace for ideas and the accurate counting of

“majorities.” Mass media, along with the extraordinary amounts of energy and money that already characterize American political campaigns, make it seem reasonable to assume that similar expenditures and technologies will be devoted to “selling” platforms based on rankings of priorities. The public will learn to evaluate candidates in terms of their harsh statements of necessary truths. Fooling most of the people most of the time will become obsolete as the great American public begins to learn the right questions to ask.

The establishment and enforcement of a “rational order of priorities” is an idea that might benefit not only the broad reaches of our national political system (and its social products), but even the smaller political systems that constitute individual social organizations—like universities or hospitals. If universities, for example, could make their minds up about priorities among categories such as teaching, research, service to the community, and the like; or about the relative importance of science and the humanities; or about the propriety of educating the masses or the elites, they would be able to function far more effectively, more efficiently, and more responsibly. The public (or whatever segment of the public is believed to be a proper democratic constituency for any such institution) should be asked to make up its *own* mind about these priorities. The institution could then allocate its resources sensibly and could then be held properly accountable for its programs.

We need, therefore, in both our overall social system as well as in our individual social institutions, new devices to provide both power and accountability. But more than that, we need help in grafting democratic theory onto bureaucratic institutions in a very large-scale society.

This plan for rationally ordering our priorities is meant to reinfuse power into both our democratic politics as well as into our scientific administration. Nothing is more conducive to tyranny and general disaster than the sense of drift and uncertainty with which both these institutions are now afflicted. This plan is a chance to steer a course between the moral arrogance of bureaucratic zealots and the rudderless impotence of pragmatic politicians. To steer this course we are asking for a return to basic democratic concepts. We are asking that the helmsman be the “voice of the people.” ■