

- Prudence is the virtue that restrains wisely the excesses of modern economic and political forces and tendencies.

THE DANGERS OF RISING EXPECTATIONS

Politics has always been a mechanism for choice. But in the old exigent, directionless societies the range of possible choice was narrow and popular expectations exerted little pressure upon government. One could choose between — or compromise — the conflicting tariff interests of southern planters and northern manufacturers, and that settlement might represent most of a year's political decision making at the federal level. The choices now are thousands of times more numerous and the expectations are now suffused with an unprecedented emotional intensity.

We have not made smoothly the transition from the old situation of political choice to the new situation. We need a new rhetoric of political discussion. We need a problem-solving approach, not an extension of the old politics of rivalrous interest

groups. We need systems analysis, which cannot make our decisions for us but can at least get into focus the relative costs and benefits of given choices.

Among the broad categories of choice is that between jam today and jam tomorrow. The Soviet Union over the decades has rigorously opted for jam tomorrow by maintaining a high rate of capital investment and a high rate of educational expenditure relative to consumer goods; this policy the U.S.S.R., under pressure of expectations, may be forced to modify. In the U.S., which has had a more balanced situation, very sharp tax increases at local, state, and federal levels could immediately alleviate much present distress in the disadvantaged 20 percent of our population — although, as has been indicated, this would not necessarily reduce ex-

pectations. And very sharp tax increases might so impair the economic dynamo that tomorrow's total product would be seriously diminished. More than half of all U.S. Negroes are active, progressing participants in "whitey's" vigorous economy — which is also their economy and the economy on which the children of poorer Negroes and poorer whites must depend for tomorrow's opportunity.

Chile's situation may illustrate another broad category of choice: between rising levels of economic growth and political freedom. Eduardo Frei's democratic regime may be succeeded by an authoritarian government that trades freedom for increased production. Similarly, more advanced countries could be panicked by high-pressure demands into accepting "efficient" government management of the economy that would exchange a promise of high growth rates for ever widening controls. Expectations, out of hand, could undo centuries of political progress toward democratic government.

Since modern expectations everywhere have an emotional component, born of Christianity's sense of moral history, they cannot be quelled by purely practical arguments about the limits of technology and economics. One needs to search within the Christian tradition for a concept that will tame expectations while respecting them.

The name of the concept is prudence — a word that does not occur much these days except as a name for girls in Quaker families. When it does appear in political debate it is taken to mean a crabbed conservatism, a cautious disengagement from the impulses of the more generous virtues.

This is not what prudence, in the Western tradition, signifies. It is the link that joins the virtues of the mind and heart, especially charity, to action. Like a good lawyer, prudence tells you how to do it right. To Aristotle, who was a political adviser as well as a philosopher, prudence was the channel between universal truths and practical affairs; it was, in

action, the fusion of intelligence and appetite.

A lot is heard these days, especially on campuses, about "commitment" and "involvement" in the great social crusades, the great expectations of our time. The impulse that leads this way does not deserve rebuke. Yet without prudence, without attention to the actual contingencies and feasibilities of life, "involvement" is doomed to be sterile — or worse.

Courage, of which we have lately heard much, is a virtue our time needs. Prudence does not diminish the courage of the good soldier; it makes his courage effective in action. Nor does prudence

diminish the courage, the compassion, the love of justice in the political administrator or the citizen; in the modern situation it leads him toward a habit of intelligent choice among the thousands of desirable steps that might be taken, but cannot be taken "all at once."

That the whole world is freeing itself from the wheel of repetition is good news derived essentially from what Christians consider the Good News. Without prudence, the expectations that have been set in motion may turn into the worst news ever. — *By Wax Ways, Excerpts from Fortune, May, 1968.*

AGAINST DOUBT

To be busy with material affairs is the best preservative against reflection, fears, doubts — all these things which stand in the way of achievement. I suppose a fellow proposing to cut his throat would experience a sort of relief while occupied in stropping his razor carefully. — *Joseph Conrad.*