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DEMOCRACY AND CULTURE

J. B. PRIESTLEY, whose views on the development of cultural standards in a free society have been the subject of discussion in the last two issues of "The Listener," believes that the democratic process tends to depress these standards, and that their maintenance should be in the hands of experts. Priestley's views have been summarised in our last two issues, and below we print the third and final group of New Zealand opinions on them. The group we have classed as "General" were asked to speak, not as specialists of any kind but as citizens.

MUSICIANS

[S] it remotely possible that the central thought underlying Mr. Priestley's words can be questioned? Whence comes the widely-held notion that "majority rule" and "democracy" are necessarily synonymous terms? If fifty-one per cent. of the people in a community decided to enslave the remaining forty-nine per cent., and carried it out, that community would be at one and the same time a perfect example of majority rule, and an almost complete negation of democracy. We do accept, of course, the decisions of a trained and qualified minority in many questions relating to our material existence. The solution of the engineering problems involved in the construction of a new municipal drainage system is decided by a few experts. No one will deny that it would be madness to decide such things by popular vote. Would any one seriously contend the failure to decide such questions by counting heads is, in any way, an infringement of democratic principle?



Spencer Digby photo

But in the other plane of human existence, spiritual values, or culture if you will, different ideas predominate. Probably a large majority of listeners to broadcast music in New Zealand look upon their licence receipts as a token of their right to a voice in the choice of music to be broadcast—a voice equal to that of all the other token holders. For is not this a democratic country? They will maintain that the particular set-up of their genes has nothing to do with it. Have they not paid their licence fee? (They also paid their share of the cost of the above-mentioned new drainage system!) Does not their licence give them the right to hear broadcasts of the sort of thing they like, merely because they like it? (What they like may well be almost as great a social menace as a defect in that drainage system would be.) They believe in the equal rights of each individual and at the same time, by their insistence on what Mr. Priestley calls "cultural democracy," deny that real individuality is of any consequence as a social asset. "Rugged individualists" almost invariably become involved in the same contradiction.

Let it be said, in passing, that our own Broadcasting Service has withstood this sort of onslaught with considerable success.

What then is this thing we call democracy if it is not "head counting?" It is a social structure which, as far as possible, gives full recognition to human inequality. (No, no! not human equality, but human inequality.) Those who have special capacities and traits will have full scope to develop them to socially useful purpose, unhindered by "shoddy commercialism" (or any other commercialism, for that matter), or the interference of those whose capacities, equally valuable though they may be, lie in

other directions. True democracy postulates one form of human equality only; and that is the equal right of each individual to cultivate, to the fullest extent possible, those individual gifts with which his biological make-up has endowed him. Provided, of course, that they are in line with the necessities of social evolution.

If this is true, it would indicate that education in its broadest and most comprehensive sense, has become man's chief instrument of survival. But, in view of H. G. Wells's recent pronouncement about the human mind, all the preachings of the Priestleys and the priestly may be too late.

—Stanley Oliver

[AM] in agreement with Mr. Priestley over his two democracies; he has said it so well that I do not think I can add anything to his pronouncement. You say you hope "to get opinions from artists, educators, writers and others specially interested." I am more curious to hear yours.



—Frederick Page

ARTISTS

PRIESTLEY gives a name to a situation I should have thought we were all well aware of. Whole masses of people are complacently rooted in their ignorance and cheaply acquired tastes. But has not this always been so, and have not the artists of integrity continued to work to their own standards? I am not so apprehensive as Priestley of the danger that it may all end with only the lower levels of taste and intelligence being allowed to survive. I think the arts are a little tougher than Priestley would appear to believe, a little more enduring. And I do not see how all intelligence can be effectively destroyed.



Lack of appreciation and neglect admittedly does not help the artist to produce good work, and it will destroy many of the weaker spirits. I am not one believing that the artist's best work comes out of his struggle to survive under difficult conditions. That is romantic nonsense. But, at most, neglect will hinder; it will not bring to an end the output of those artists who believe in themselves and know what they are doing.

And Priestley agrees that the world anyway eventually discovers the best. I believe this is so. Given plenty of time whole sections of people come to appreciate the enduring quality of certain works. It is too bad, of course, that enlightenment normally dawns so late, and

that by this time the creator of such work is seldom present to share in the celebration of his discovery.

If standards of taste, appreciation, and presentation were generally higher this process of arriving at the correct valuation of work being produced would not take so long. The zero level of taste and the poor aesthetic judgment evident in the mass of English-speaking people is a great drag. We in this country rest smugly on one of the lowest levels of all. We have few indeed capable or confident enough to make any authoritative judgment when it comes to aesthetic questions. The radio and films, particularly the Hollywood ones, have helped us little, if at all. They have done more, as Priestley says, towards confirming the greater proportion of the people in their mental laziness and bad taste; and it is in their power to do so much good. This is also true of the press. But I think it debatable whether these institutions are actually lowering the level of public taste. Such a conclusion presupposes the existence of a higher level of taste to begin with.

With the level of public taste prevailing in our time it is madness, of course, to count heads in deciding questions of aesthetics. Counting heads in this case is silly enough, but the worst evil is that most of it these days is actually done on coins. Among the great bulk of the people it is the money token that has become the unquestioned basis of all valuation in culture as well as in commerce.

—Eric Lee Johnson

PRIESTLEY seems very pleased with political democracy, but very sore about its natural offspring, cultural democracy. This, as he describes it, seems to differ somewhat from its parent, in that it works as a sort of all-in, non-stop referendum, whereas the parent body consults the people once in three years (or seven), and ignores 'em the rest of the time. Something in between might be better for both.

Coming down to cases, Lord Reith's attitude is satisfactory to me; in fact it's the only honest line to take. That, if followed through, should iron out most of Priestley's worries, provided you start with the right Reith and don't gag, hog-tie and hamstring him.

When talking of farm-hands and the Arts, Priestley needs to be careful. They're apt to be tricky, these rustics. I'm told there was a ploughman one time up Ayrshire way who knew quite a bit about playing the words an' a' that.

One of our troubles is that in both spheres—political and cultural—the exponents of the second-rate are often more vocal than the rest. By easy stages

(continued on next page)



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