

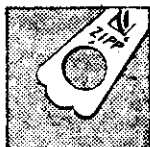


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## BRAINS, ETCETERA

**T**HE man who thought of the "brains trust" idea was one of the genuine innovators of broadcasting. I presume it was Donald McCullough who first gave it the form now so familiar to us, but I may be wrong. At any rate, his BBC Brains Trust, which began on January 1, 1941, was the beginning of the thing as far as the man in the street is aware.

There was nothing especially novel about the ingredients: a microphone, and four or five men and women chosen for their ability to talk about a wide range of topics about which questions were sent in by listeners. The session caught the ear of the public partly because it was a change from the single speaker, and partly because of the "slant" that was given to it by calling it a "brains trust."

Having acted as Questionmaster in the 1YA Opinion Please session, I feel impelled to get a few things off my chest.

Opinion Please is, of course, closely modelled on the BBC session. Most people probably refer to it as the "1YA brains trust." The term is catchy, but not without its back-lash. There is, after all, something slightly insolent about five people trying, as it were, to set up a monopoly in "brains." It shouldn't be looked upon in that light, needless to say. No doubt the BBC meant the term to be taken more or less playfully. But I have no doubt it irritates some people. They should regard it as nothing more than a piece of orange-coloured cellophane in which the goods are wrapped.

**I** THINK the reason why the brains trust idea caught on is that it reflects fairly faithfully an attitude, and a particular technique, that have evolved naturally during the past few decades and have come to be part of mid 20th Century life. Let me try to explain what I mean.

First of all, the attitude. We are rather less certain of ourselves nowadays than were our grandfathers. Their world was more stable. Their beliefs were strongly held, and seemed to be well-founded. It was natural enough for them to lay down the law. The idea of a man speaking *ex cathedra* on any particular subject did not seem to them to be the least bit preposterous.

In these times we take rather less for granted. We distrust those who claim to have discovered the final truth about anything. We even distrust our own hesitant beliefs. The idea of having some question talked over by several people, who take different points of view, appeals to us much more than listening to a single speaker. It provides a sort of "objective correlative" for our own habitual scepticism. (I am referring only to discussion about controversial things. We listen readily



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enough to speakers who tell us about their own experiences, or who merely provide information about things we are interested in.) The brains trust pattern somehow fits our notion of how controversial ideas should be put forward.

I mentioned also a "technique." In past times people in positions of high authority could very often act successfully without taking the advice of others. The world of affairs was less complicated, and a single mind was better able to keep a grasp of things. To-day it would be beyond the power of any man, whatever his intellectual stature, to master all the knowledge required in running a state, or a mass-production industry, or any large organisation. Nowadays men in high positions are compelled to rely very largely, not on one adviser even, but on half-a-dozen, or 20. I have been told that the late Mr. Coates, when he was Prime Minister of New Zealand, used to summon his four or five advisers round a table, put some question before them, and let them wrangle about it. He would listen to the talk, not saying much himself, but trying to find the answers he needed. This was all very right and proper. They were there to have their brains picked; it was his job to pick them. The technique he adopted was more or less that of the brains trust. The same technique is used by many men in positions of authority to-day. And, if the public wants information, there is no reason why broadcasting should not allow them to use the same method.

**I**T would be fatuous, all the same, to suggest that the primary purpose of a radio brains trust is simply to supply information. This brings me to the question: What is a brains trust? Or rather, what ought it to be?

There is a method used by theologians to define the nature and attributes of the Supreme Being, by a process of negation, or exclusion—that is, by setting down all the things that God is not. Perhaps that is the best way to go about describing a brains trust.

First of all, a brains trust is not a quiz. The quiz is intended to bring forth factual information, and at the

(continued on next page)