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GOOD DEMOCRATS ASK QUESTIONS :

"Progress Has Always Depended On Discontented Individuals Who Disregarded Opposition"

This talk from the BBC is one
of a new series by ST. JOHN
ERVINE, who is known through-
out the English speaking world
as author, playwright and critic.
He here discusses some of the
great historical movements of
the past, and with them he
associates the names of some
great individuals. It is his argu-
ment that such movements,
initiated as they were by in-
dividuals, would not have been
possible in Totalitarian States.
Do you agree?

A FEW years before the begin-
ning of the war I had an in-
teresting and surprising talk
with a distinguished oculist who
was about to operate on my right
eye. A well-known millionaire who
was famous for his munificent gifts to
the community had recently endowed a
school of medical research. I took it for
granted that my friend the surgeon would
be delighted with this gift, but he wasn't
in the least delighted. I won't say that
he disapproved of the endowment, but
he certainly was not enthusiastic about
it, and as the reason he gave for his
coldness has some bearing on the whole
theory of Government, and the beliefs
for which we are fighting in this war, I
shall spend the next few minutes in re-
lating them to you. But before I do so,
let me remind you that this war, more
perhaps than any other war in the his-
tory of mankind, is about beliefs.

If I were asked to state very simply
and very shortly what I think this war
is about, I should reply that it is a con-
flict between those who think that the
community is more important than the
individual, and those who think that the
individual is more important than the

community. It is obvious that in a State,
in a community where the State is re-
garded as supreme and the individual
is treated as no more than a cog in the
national wheel, no change of any kind
can be proposed without the sanction of
the people in power, and people in power
do not like change, even though they
themselves propose it. That is the chief
fact which emerges from the history of
human life.

The Experience of Galileo

All men of authority tend to become
very pleased with themselves and to
resent not only change, but any sug-
gestion that change is desirable. Yet we
know beyond the shadow of a doubt,
that every improvement and discovery
that has benefited mankind has been
made not by Cabinets or committees or
unrestricted rulers, but by discontented
individuals whose efforts to realise their
thoughts were fiercely opposed by the
people in power.

For nearly 2,000 years every learned
man in Europe believed Aristotle's state-
ment that if two bodies, one being
heavier than the other, were simultane-
ously to be dropped from a height, the
heavier body would hit the ground first.
It was not until 1590 that a young
mathematical professor named Galileo
climbed to the top of the leaning Tower
of Pisa, and in the presence of the scep-
tical and derisive faculty and the stu-
dents of the University, he dropped two
weights, one weighing 10 pounds and the
other one pound, simultaneously. They
both hit the ground at the same moment,
but the University authorities were not
convinced by the evidence of their own
eyes. They returned to the library to
re-read Aristotle. There it was in black
and white. "A body weighing ten pounds
must," said Aristotle, "reach the ground
before a body weighing one pound." That
was good enough for the Professors, and
they ordered Galileo to stop wasting his
time with silly experiments.

Steamships and 'Planes Derided

Harvey, who discovered the circula-
tion of the blood, was called a lunatic
by his contemporaries. Lister's use of
antiseptics earned him the dislike and
enmity of the London Surgical Society.
In the year 1797, the Lords of the Ad-
miralty refused to make a grant to Lord
Stafford on an experiment with a steam-
ship because they were unanimously of
the opinion that it would never be pos-
sible to move a vessel without the aid
of wind and tide. In 1908 the Lords of
the Admiralty, who had not learnt any
lesson from that incident, rejected an
offer of co-operation from the famous
aviators, the Wright Brothers, because
their experts—mark that word "experts"
—were satisfied that aeroplanes could
be of no practical use.

The Duke of Wellington resisted the
proposal to build railways because he
thought it was neither necessary nor pos-
sible to travel at a greater speed than
23 miles an hour. "Any person who
moved in a train travelling at that speed



GENERAL WILLIAM BOOTH
Suffered persecution

would," he said, "die of it. His nose
would become so congested with air
rushing furiously through them that
they would burst." Even H. G. Wells,
whose capacity to look into the future
is greater than that of most people, once
wrote in a printed book that the sub-
marine could never be more than an
expensive and useless toy. Every person
who has invented or discovered a means
of improving the lot of mankind has
had to fight the authorities for his very
life.

Hardening of Intellectual Arteries

That brings me to my friend the
oculist. "All schools, whatever their char-
acter," he said, "have a tendency to
harden their intellectual arteries. The
principal of such a school has the human
habit of liking his own ideas better than
other peoples, and he surrounds himself
with congenial colleagues. He will, as far
as he can, appoint to positions in his
school only those who share his opinions
and support his policy. A doctor who
believed in open air treatment for con-
sumptives had little or no hope of ap-
pointment in a hospital where every
window was tightly closed and the tuber-
cular patient was kept in a hot and stuffy
atmosphere. There were medical men
who believed in what they call the
'therapeutic value' of pain, and they de-
clined to perform operations under
anæsthetics. There were other people
who were impious enough to say that
the use of anæsthetics was a blasphemous
interference with the will of God. They
seemed never to have understood the
meaning of the 21st verse of the 2nd
chapter of the Book of Genesis, which
is a summary of an account of an opera-
tion under anæsthetics that anyone who
wishes to can read."

(Continued on next page)