

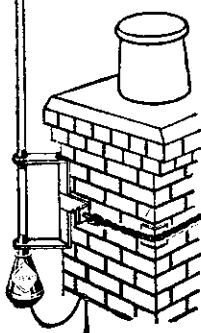
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Freedom Among the Machines

A SERIES of seven talks, described on page 8, will presently invite us to think again about the modern dilemma in politics. Can there be security with freedom, or does the welfare state move inevitably towards total bureaucracy? The speakers look uneasily towards the future. They know that the evolution of the machine has opened immense possibilities in material welfare, but that the benefits of technology can be shared by the people only if the means of production are used on their behalf, for the common good. Equality has to be organised; and the organisers have great power. Men love power; they do not surrender it willingly, and in a tightly-controlled state a ruling group can impose its will on the masses.

The ultimate result, the loss of individual freedom and the denial of human dignity, has been predicted with merciless clarity in George Orwell's *1984*, a parable which seems to have been much in the minds of speakers in the "Frankenstein" series. It is not necessary to go to fiction for examples of oppression, though fiction can show what may happen if the evils of totalitarian rule are extended. Even in the democracies, where *1984* remains merely a nightmare, there have been signs that the zeal of planners should be checked in the interests of liberty. The dilemma has arisen from the desire for security, which has a long history of political thought and action. Fulfilment came, or seemed to come, when technology supplied rational means; and men were slow to realise that its methods could not be safely applied to the organisation of society.

In a democracy, fortunately, it is possible to see what is happening and to use the corrective in-

fluence of public opinion. The Parliamentary system allows an electorate to call a halt or to press forward as the majority dictates. But the only effective way in which a centralising movement can be checked is for the people to play a larger part in their own affairs. It is better, as one speaker in the series declares, for farmers to organise themselves for greater production than to accept controls which could lead ultimately to the nationalisation of the land. Another speaker asks if it is as necessary today as it used to be for the control of education to be highly centralised. And a third speaker, a woman, says that the family is under too much pressure from experts, and fears the results of "this implicit attack upon the self-confidence of parents."

We have had a great deal of scientific treatment in recent years, and there are signs of reaction. The pendulum, of course, can swing too far. Controls are not evils in themselves; they are necessary in some fields, superfluous and dangerous in others. We cannot manage without expert guidance, but in some places (the home is one of them) it is no substitute for the wisdom taken from experience. To say that we can do without the planners and the experts in a complex society is to retreat from reality. But we can set limits to their activities. When this is done, however, responsibility for social welfare cannot be shelved: it must be transferred to others, and should be spread more widely in the community. The centralising movement in politics is by no means ended in some parts of the world; but in democratic countries the old habits of self-government are asserting themselves. They are necessary habits, much in need of cultivation, if there is to be freedom among the machines.

N.Z. LISTENER, JANUARY 28, 1955.