

Definition

Raymond Williams

Raymond Williams' belated centenary celebrations led us to revisit his advice in the early days of The Spokesman journal. He was speaking in March 1970, shortly after Russell's death, at Central Hall, Westminster, at a public meeting to 'Honour Bertrand Russell – Carry on his Work!'

Bertrand Russell was an intellectual in politics, not simply an intellectual about politics, which is a very much easier thing to be (studying politics from a distance, a necessary but a different thing). He was an intellectual *in* politics; that is to say a man who was at once and remained over a very long life a working intellectual, who through a succession of world crises never gave up the practice of exacting intellectual work, much of it necessarily lonely, but who at the same time never at any time thought that that work gave him a reason, at certain decisive moments, from going where the political action was. That Russell should have sat in the streets at 90, that he should have done this at that age and at that time, when the whole problem of what it was to be intellectual in this sort of country was in question, was important in a permanent way, quite apart from the degree to which, at particular points, one had to agree with him. It was a definition of a particular role, because in either direction it is so easy to give up. It is easy to say that a particular world situation is so critical that prolonged study and thought, the necessary disciplines of intellectual work, cannot be afforded. Russell never said that. At the same time, it is very easy to say that because intellectual work is necessary there is no time for the business of politics, which is very different, which is rougher, and which, particularly to a man like Russell, involved going beyond the forums he had immediately available to him on the basis of the work he had previously done, and meant going as a man among others in the cause of a popular movement.

I think it is going to be very hard for any

group of people to do, collectively, the kind of work which, in his last years, he was doing; in a sense because his authority was of a very rare kind. Not, I think necessarily, the authority of truth of the beliefs which are at the centre of his intellectual work.

I will say quite frankly that, except in politics, I rarely agreed with him. But in politics I usually did. What was outstanding, I think, was not his rightness, but the authority practically executed over so many years, over what amounted really to several lifetimes in the ordinary sense, the authority of the independent intellectual, even when he was wrong.

The first time I ever had sense of him as an adult, as opposed to the sense I had of him at school and so on, I felt bitterly hostile to him. This was at the time of the preventive war proposal in the late 1940s. At other times I felt neutral, at other times passionately on his side. But the point was that one always knew with this man, and it is a rarer thing than it ought to be, that here was a man whose mind was his own. It was not to be bought, it was not to be pressured. Yet at the same time he knew that his mind could not be only his own, in the reality of social life and in the reality of social crisis. This is the problem that Russell, sometimes magnificently as in the last years, sometimes in error, but always I think as the leading man of his generation who attempted this, continually defined. Where at once your mind is your own, absolutely, and you resist the innumerable pressures of every kind that anybody who does work of this sort is exposed to: pressures of money, which are always available in this society; pressures of loyalty to old friends and comrades, which can often happen when a situation changes; pressures of orthodox public opinion; all the time fear of ridicule, fear of the kind of sneer that comes easily to the Anglo-Saxon mind, that you are going outside your field. All these bids for the man's mind which he has got to resist, but then the one bid for his mind which he cannot resist, which is to put it in the service of something more important even than truth, more important than himself and the preservation of his mind, and this is precisely the crisis Russell faced when he pushed out beyond the highly abstract disciplines in which he had been working to the roughest and most confused and confusing business of social and political reality.

Russell's authority was the authority of the committed independent. That double stress he has earned, and which combined with the reverence due to his age, was an essentially irreplaceable authority. And I don't know really that in that sense one ought to look for replacing it. Because what clearly is involved in the situation I have been describing is the need for the collaboration of independent intellectuals in the sense that Russell was

one; a collaboration, a commitment to a common cause, which is sustainable as a common cause and yet which is not the shabby version of the common cause into which so many intellectuals have again and again found themselves being led. The common cause which is truly open, commonly defined, and yet at the same time which is a common cause and to which commitment is given.

The Chairman has told you that one of Russell's last acts was to found a monthly magazine, *The Spokesman*. I am very glad that this has been done and I was glad to accept an invitation to join its editorial board. I have no authority except as one member of the board among others to speak about its policy, but in line with what I have been previously saying I will say what I think its policy ought to be in the most general terms. I think the situation that we now face in the early 1970s is so complicated that the test will become more severe rather than less. For this reason, on the one hand there is a very visible social crisis of an international kind, an aggressive imperialism which is capable only of being resisted, which has reached the point where it has literally to be fought and where it is fought. That visible crisis is taking place in so many countries of the world, but characteristically away from countries like our own, away from the old imperial countries, leaving those people who are in the old imperial countries in a double situation, having to give very much in the way of support and clarification to that struggle, having to circulate facts, to insist towards their own authorities, and to fight them where necessary, to see that the resources of our people are not enlisted as they have in a sort of tacit default been enlisted, on the wrong side, on the anti-popular side.

There is that commanding crisis which is so visible, and then another one which I think is not very visible at all, something that is happening within this still comparatively peaceful society, something which one cannot predict with any certainty, but which I know in my bones is happening. This is the emergence, the planned emergence, of a new social order, and it is not the social order that Russell or any other progressive man of this century has been talking about. It is the emergence in quite new forms, without obvious kinds of open mass deprivation, the emergence of a controlled society, of a quite new and sophisticated kind, in which very many people will suffer but will suffer in separate groups, in separate ways, on disparate issues, often not recognising in the face of someone else – across the screen as it characteristically will be – a victim of the same process which has made them victims. It will be a process in some ways so indirect, so locked into the apparent normality of this society, so continually fed by a powerful communications system, that day by day the

mind may slip into accepting as normal what no free man ever could accept as normal. And this will be happening at the same time that a visible and a bloody crisis of imperialism is taking place, in the rest of the world, and is part, though in quite different ways, of this thing that is happening to us.

Now I think it will be the business of *The Spokesman* as anything inheriting Russell's role would be bound to do, to carry news of the struggle against imperialism, to carry analyses of it, to carry reports from its leaders as they emerge, because these things are very badly reported indeed in this country. But it will have to do that in ways that don't allow us to become spectators of the struggle for and against imperialism. It will have to be done in ways that continually tie it in to what is happening in this society, in so many sectors; all the way through new conditions of work and the efforts to establish workers' control; through new pressures in education which are of a very severe kind, and the real explanation that it is necessary of the struggle now going on in the universities to maintain a liberal freedom, let alone to extend it. It will have to reach into areas of tension in the society which are still often picked up as personal symptoms, as in some sense matters of some psychological sickness: tensions which may only emerge in that form, but which have forms through which this unprecedented social crisis is taking shape. And it will have to do this not on the one hand and then on the other, which is easy to do. It will have to do it so that it is an attempt at one body of thought.

Even to say that is to recognise that that definition is ideal, that in a sense none of us, even collectively, will know quite enough, will be able to work quite hard enough, will be able to be precise enough. But I think I can say that the people starting *The Spokesman* are going to try. They are introducing this magazine, into what is already a very good and lively press of the Left, with one special emphasis, that they cover a quite broad front of opinion. And I think *The Spokesman* will only in that sense be a spokesman while this remains so, because it is crucially important. The Left has never been more active, yet in a way never more quick to suspicion of each other, and to marking off an indefinite series of fractions which perhaps even Russell's mathematics couldn't have contained. Nevertheless, and I have moved among the fractions and have often become one of the more vulgar, I know perfectly well that within this there is a continual wish to be in touch and to cooperate, to build the kind of front which I think in the 1970s is going to be profoundly necessary.

One further emphasis: one which I think comes very near to the sense I have of Russell. Russell was an aristocrat. He had an aristocrat's

education, he went to what is the first or second most aristocratic college in the first or second most aristocratic university in a profoundly aristocratic society. And when he once said (and I have heard this recording over and over again) ‘I will not’ — you know, as a form of refusal — one heard that power and background of the aristocrat. The people he used to say ‘I will not’ to, the people he would write to, whom I wouldn’t even know had a letter box, showed the confidence of the aristocrat, and he went in as one of the leading minds of his time, from the centre of a major university, pushed that way all the time.

But still he always insisted that wherever the argument led, and into whatever difficulties of language, in the end the argument only mattered what it came back to the ordinary language of men. It is what I said at the beginning. The intellectual must go where his work leads him, he has no duty higher than that, but when it leads him away from the interests of humanity and away from the language of humanity, something, it may be very hard to find out what, has gone wrong with the work. This attempt by Russell to bring the most rigorous intellectual work back to ordinary issues and ordinary language is the most essential definition I would want to give of *The Spokesman*, because that is what would earn it its title. That is what would give it some claim other than its succession to be carrying on the work of Bertrand Russell.

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