THE TASK OF THE DEMOCRATIC STATE

Dr. ETIENNE GILSON

Professor, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Toronto

As a guest of Canada, I feel bound in conscience not to take sides in your own political problems. Canadian political problems are, and must remain, the exclusive property of Canadians. What I can do is something altogether different. Being by profession much more of a philosopher than a politician, I can briefly outline for you the main tasks which Liberalism has to undertake in any country of the world, at the present time, and I shall try to do it in an impersonal way. I was about to say, in a "philosophical" way. I know full well there is something impractical attached to the word philosophy, but since I personally believe that nothing is more practical than clear ideas, my main purpose will be to define the nature of the problem which Liberalism has now to solve and to point out the principle which commands its solution.

The very name of Liberalism conveys to the mind the notion of liberty. A man is a liberal inasmuch as he stands for liberty. But what kind of liberty?

Since we are dealing with political problems, the obvious answer is: a liberal is a man who, in everything, stands for political liberty. And the answer is correct, but I would like to make clear that its very correctness is one of the main causes of our present difficulties. For it is both correct and incomplete. It is correct, because Liberalism is indeed the born defender of political liberty: it is incomplete, because political liberty is not an end in itself, but a means to ensure all other liberties. Thus, there are men who consider themselves as liberals because they are willing to grant political liberty to all; yet, in point of fact, such men may be a great danger to true Liberalism, precisely because they overlook many concrete implications of the word liberty.

To make clear what I mean, let us consider the main result of the French Revolution of 1789. It gained for all French citizens their political liberty, and it can be said that, generally speaking, men are now enjoying political liberty in all civilized countries. At least they are supposed to. They can all vote and choose their own government. This is so true that even in countries where there is but a single official party, for which everybody is practically obliged to vote, there are still elections. Political liberty is so thoroughly recognized as the very condition for a normal political life that even where it no longer exists, everything goes as if it still existed. In short, all civilized men are, or at least are supposed to be, politically free, and free from all political domination either by a man or by a class. Political liberty thus means political equality.

This would be the whole of liberty, if there were no other dominating powers than the political ones and, consequently, no other inequalities than political inequalities. But there are social and economic powers, and they entail social and economic inequality. I have just mentioned the French Revolution. Now it is perfectly clear that, after conquering their political liberty, the French have found themselves in exactly the same economic situation as they used to be before their political liberation. It is true some noblemen lost their fortunes at the time of the Revolution while other persons were making their fortunes on the same occasion, but, on the whole, the political revolution of 1789 has not been attended by anything like an economic revolution. In other words, men have then acquired their political liberty without acquiring, at the same time, their economic liberty.

This, as I see it, is the gist of the problem and the very root of our present political difficulties. For men have reacted to this situation in two opposite ways, which have led to the formation of two opposite political doctrines, each of which finds its own justification in the very negation of the other one.

The first of these two doctrines rests upon the more or less complete acceptance of the situation now obtaining. Let us call it pure political democracy. May I here remind you that I am not describing any given party in any given country. For, indeed, the same name may well signify different things in different places. I am merely defining
an abstract principle and, so to speak, the very essence of a certain political attitude under whatever name it may now happen to be found. What I wish to make clear is not that pure political democracy is not interested in economic liberty, but rather, that it reduces economic liberty to political liberty. In other words, the very essence of political democracy is the assumption that, once a man is politically free, he is free in all senses of the word. Political liberty then is economic liberty.

Let us try to make this clear, for it would not do to suppose that such a position does not make sense. It does make sense. There is no absurdity in maintaining that, once a man is given his political liberty, society does not owe him anything more. It is up to him, through his own work and his own intelligence, to make the best of his political liberty in order to acquire all that he needs or wants to acquire. Everybody is then fighting for himself and let the best man win!

The result of this attitude has been quite remarkable. Prior to the age of democracy, there were already striking inequalities in wealth, yet the ruling class was not always identical with the wealthy class. A nobleman might be exceedingly wealthy or he might be exceedingly poor, he still a nobleman, while rich merchants or rich bankers were but bankers or merchants. In countries where nobility has now disappeared as a political power—which means practically everywhere—wealth has become the mark of the ruling class. Political privileges have been abolished, but, for this very reason, economic privileges now often reign supreme. They are supreme, precisely because there now remains no politically privileged class to control them.

Pure political democracy—or democracy that has no other ambition than to achieve political equality by removing all political privileges—has naturally tended in the economic field to the progressive concentration of wealth within the hands of comparatively few men. These men themselves can be said to constitute a kind of economic nobility, which is typical of what we call a capitalistic regime. Capitalism is a regime where, owing to an exclusively political democracy, a small body of economically strong citizens can wholly dominate a larger body of economically weak citizens.

Politically speaking, they are all equal; economically speaking, they are not. For all practical purposes a big capitalist can exercise at least as much power, through his money, on those who work for him, as any count, earl or prince has ever exercised on his own political subjects.

Now this is exactly what Marxists mean when they say that capitalism is nothing else than a new form of feudalism, and that what they want to do is to destroy this economic feudalism, exactly as the French Revolution once destroyed the political one. To express the same idea in positive terms, let us say that the alleged aim and purpose of Marxism is to add economic liberty to political liberty, thereby completing the work left undone by the French Revolution.

Such a reaction to pure political democracy was unavoidable—at the very least, it was to be expected. As soon as a man has political liberty with the right to administer his own affairs, he begins to wonder how that right will help him in bettering his own condition. Nothing is more natural. The end of politics is not to ensure the triumph of some abstract notion of human nature, but to achieve the greatest possible happiness for existing groups of human beings. Look at political programmes! They all invite us to vote for a certain party, while rich men because its programme is supposed to be best calculated to give everybody work, decent wages, housing, the necessary amount of food and even, in some cases, a certain amount of unnecessary drinks. In other words, all political programmes are largely economic in kind, because political liberty now appears to us as the means to another end: economic liberty. This is what Marxism has clearly understood, and this understanding constitutes its real force. Marxism promises people what they are most anxious to get, namely social security and economic liberty.

I would like to make this quite clear. Many people are very afraid of Communism, and rightly so, but they don’t know what they are afraid of. They anxiously wonder what makes its strength, and they can find no answer. Now, what makes its strength is their very ignorance of the fundamental fact that lies at the bottom of the movement. I quite agree that Marxism is a plague, but so long as we
do not know what germ causes the disease, we are unable to stop it. Yet, in the case of this particular plague, the nature of the pathological germ is well known, or at least, it should be known. It is a fact that while they are full-fledged citizens on the political level, many workers still remain, in their working life, mere economic subjects, swayed from above by economic powers in which they have no share.

If we want to remove Marxism we should first remove its cause. I do not care what name you will give to the party that does this; what I feel sure of is that, whatever its name, such a party is ultimately certain to win, because this happens to be the only thing there really is to do. Whatever country I might happen to be a citizen of, I personally would enlist in the party whose main programme it were to use political democracy with a view to achieving social and economic democracy. What is wrong with Marxism is not that it wants to do this. Quite the reverse, that is what appears right with Marxism, and the real source of Marxism's political power is precisely that it claims to do the right thing. What is wrong with Marxism is that it cannot do the job; or, rather, that wherever it achieves a measure of success, Marxism does exactly the reverse. It first suppresses political liberty and then, by way of necessary consequence, it annihilates what little may already exist of social and economic liberty.

The reason for it is not mysterious, and whoever reads Marx's *Capital* is bound to see it. How did Marx understand the transition from capitalism to socialism? True enough, he called it a revolution, but, at the same time, he saw it as an unavoidable and necessary revolution, because he conceived it as the last stage of the natural evolution of capitalism. The century-long history of capitalism is that of a progressive accumulation of wealth and of economic power in a decreasing number of hands. But the Marxist revolution turns out to be but a last effort of concentration, whereby the whole of economic wealth finds itself concentrated within a single hand, that of the state. Thus, the sworn enemy of capitalism, Marxism itself, is nothing but capitalism. It is the most acute form of the very disease which it pretends to cure, since it represents state capitalism, the situation which obtains when there is but a single, solitary capitalist left, namely the state, to which all so-called citizens are both politically and economically subjected: politically, because, should Marxism leave them any amount of political liberty, they would at once make use of it to regain their economic independence; economically, because, where there is only one capitalist, there can be only one employer, namely the state, for which everybody else is bound to work as an employee.

Marxism thus achieves political equality through equally depriving all men of their political liberty, just as it achieves economic equality through equally depriving all men of their economic liberty. Today, at least some of us still enjoy economic freedom; after Marxism, nobody will.

This, of course, is clearly seen by the advocates of pure political democracy, and, insofar as they see it, they are well justified in opposing Marxism. If there must be misery, misery for some is still better than misery for all. Such is the reason why, in all countries where political life is still free, we generally find two political schools fiercely fighting each other. Fiercely, yet vainly, because the programme of the one is to destroy the other. The only programme of capitalist democracy is to stop Marxism just as the only programme of Marxism is to destroy capitalist democracy. They are both boasting to be the true democracy, while, in point of fact, neither is. Indeed, they are both making the same mistake of forgetting the problem at stake. Anti-capitalism is no more a political programme than is anti-Marxism. An intelligent man's political programme cannot consist in being against something, but in being for something. I sincerely believe that innumerable men of good will are most anxious to solve the problem, but the trouble is that they do not know how the problem can be solved. The trouble is that every time any one of them attempts to solve it, he is accused of being a Marxist; then he himself begins to wonder if, after all, he is not a Marxist, and, as he does not like that uneasy feeling, he desists in his undertaking. All this because of his failure clearly to see, that, far from requiring a Marxist solution, the problem cannot be solved in a Marxist way.
How then can the problem be solved? I will tell you, and I have no objection to your smiling at the naive simplicity of my answer, but I must also beg you to warn me that I take it as a serious one. The only way for us to solve the problem is to invent its solution. This answer is significant, because to invent is to create something new. It means therefore that what we are up against is the necessity for us first, to look neither to pure political democracy nor to Marxism, and next to steer a new course towards a type of political society that will be radically different from both.

I am saying "a new course" and not "a middle course," for nothing would be more dangerous for us than attempting some confused combination of unrestricted capitalism and Marxism, which would ultimately result in adding up and in multiplying the evil effects of both. What we have to do is to create something different. And the best way for us to do so is not to criticize the way our adversaries are applying their principles, but to state our own principles and then to apply them implicitly.

I am sorry to say that I must here ask you to bear with some philosophical considerations. They will be very simple, but they are necessary, because pure political democracy and Marxism both ultimately rest upon a certain idea of man. They both hold that man is an individual, and nothing else. This is particularly striking in the case of that purely political democracy which Marxism is now opposing. Politically speaking, each citizen counts for one, and the government itself expresses the result of a simple sum. Everyman's political power is therefore a strictly limited one, yet, within its limits, it is absolutely independent. So far, so good; but the question then is to know if economic democracy naturally follows from political democracy. And it rather looks as if the very reverse were true, for, if we admit that individuals are absolutely independent in their economic activities, the result shall necessarily be what we can see it is. Owing to an unrestricted concentration of wealth within the hands of a minority, those who grow economically stronger soon dominate the weaker ones.

Hence, a first consequence of economic individualism is to create excessive economic inequality, from which soon follows a second one, namely that it destroys, or at least threatens to destroy, even political equality. To enjoy the right to vote once every other four or five years, is, for workers, a very meagre consolation if each and every day of their lives they are effectively subjected to the domination of some economic feudality. But this is not all, for wealth and economic power are not without conferring some additional political power to those who own them. Money can do a good deal to influence public opinion; it can act either through the press or, sometimes in a less honourable way, even on the state. Thus, in purely political democracies, the economic liberty of the rich not only hurts the economic liberty of the poor, but threatens to destroy their political liberty. Despite all contrary appearances, Marxism deals with the problem in exactly the same spirit, only, this time, the whole process reaches its full conclusion. A single economic power exists, the state, and, under the state, a multitude of individuals who, losing the very right to strike, suffer the loss of their economic as well as political liberties.

What can we do to redress such a situation? Insofar as workers themselves are concerned, there is little use in warning them that they are going to lose their economic independence under Marxism. They cannot be afraid to lose it, because, so far, many have not yet obtained it. The right way for us to fight against Marxism is to build up such a democracy as will include, in its very structure, the economic and social conditions without which political democracy itself cannot last. The creating of political democracy will mean nothing else than our firm resolution to carry justice everywhere into all orders of human relations. Such is the full meaning of the word "democracy."

What should now be made clear to all is that social justice is no more Marxism than Marxism itself is social justice. Social justice is the social form of democracy but we won't achieve it unless we first realize two facts, namely, that man is not an abstract individual entity, but a person, and that he is always to be found in one or several social groups whose proper end it is to ensure the fulfilment of his own personality.
This may sound abstract and some of you might even believe that there is no difference between an individual and a person. Actually, you all know it. A tree is an individual, a horse is an individual, but we would not call them persons. Man is an individual, but he is also a person, and the specific difference that makes him a person is that he is endowed with intellectual knowledge or reason. As a rational being, man is able to know and to judge for himself in all matters pertaining to human life. From this point of view each of us is called upon to build up his own life according to his better judgment or according to the laws of reason. There, and nowhere else, lies the root of liberty itself and, consequently, of all particular liberties. Were I asked to sum up this point in as few words as possible, I would say that fully to own oneself is, for every human person, the very essence of his liberty.

If this be true, any political regime that results in depriving men of the free disposal of their own persons should be rejected as contrary to human nature, and therefore as contrary to moral law. There is no respect for human persons in a political regime where, with no limits set on the free play of individual interests, the right to private property becomes, not the means for all men to possess what they need, but the means, for some men, to prevent other men from exercising the same right. Indeed, when a man does not own his body, he finds it difficult to own his soul. But there is still less respect for human persons in a Marxist society where each man is but a cog in some gigantic industrial machine, which, in the name of technical progress, crushes human beings instead of helping them to insure the full development of their personalities.

Let us therefore state, as our first political principle, that the aim and scope of all our activities shall be to organize human relations in such a way that each human person, soul and body, be safe against all forms of oppression, be it that of the state or of other individuals.

Here again this may sound to you abstract, impractical and vague, but, if you will think it over, you will not fail to realize that nothing is more practical than such a proposal. When confronted with a political problem, always ask your-

self: Of these two or three possible laws, which one will better help my fellow citizens in becoming full owners of their own persons and more free to achieve their own human ends?

If you are clear-sighted enough to see the right solution, bold enough to choose it and clever enough to apply it, do not worry about anything else. Some people may call you names, but that does not matter, for you will be on the right road, the one that can lead any nation to true democracy.

What names will you be called? Well I suppose, Marxists, radicals, and what not. But I say that it does not matter, because that will not make you be what you are not. What really matters is to understand why you will be called such names, and that, if the fault is partly that of the name-callers, it is also partly ours. We have not yet done all that is possible to make them realize that the very essence of our political attitude is just as opposed to Marxism as it is to the conditions of economic anarchy which now prevail in all purely political democracies. We have not yet made it quite clear that we are not asking the state to eliminate human persons, but, concretely, to realize the practical conditions that are required to ensure, through the free exercise of all liberties, the complete development of all human personalities.

Now is the time for us to remember that man's very intelligence, whereby he is a free person, far from isolating him from other men, is for him the means to communicate with all. Because he is a rational animal, man also is a social animal—not in spite of it, but because of it. In other words, because society is required for the full development of human persons, not a single man lives nor can live outside social groups. His family first, which is the most primitive and the most natural of social groups; next his profession, which is also for him the nucleus of a social group; then there is his country, and we should not forget his church.

The existence of these groups is for us the key to the practical solution of our problems. Are we going to say that, because human beings are all engaged in such groups,
they are deprived of their liberty? Quite the reverse! It is only through his family, his profession, his country, his church that each man can become a human being worthy of the name. All these social groups are as many necessary conditions for the effective actualization, through liberty, of human personalities.

This again is not an abstract idea, it is a fact; and one that can be established in a perfectly objective way. These social structures are so clearly the necessary conditions for the exercise of personal liberties that Marxism is everywhere doing its very best to do away with them. Any social group that stands between individual citizens and the state is for them a powerful protection against the state; hence it is a protection for their persons as well as for their liberties. It is no wonder that totalitarian states utterly dislike them. But is not this one more reason for us to cherish and to protect them? Assuredly, since they are our only protection against the unbearable tyranny of the state!

But here is also the point where pure political democracy makes its worst mistake. In order to protect individuals from the state, it refuses to have them protected by the state. Why should it be so? The proper function of the state is neither to monopolize all rights and all liberties, nor blindly to trust human nature as if its natural goodness were bound to bring about the spontaneous triumph of social order, economic justice, and mutual charity. Not only has this method already been tried, and failed, but modern societies have reached such a stage of technical development that state intervention is in some cases necessary, and in many other cases desirable, in order that what now remains the privilege of a happy few may become the common good for all. To say this is neither Marxism, nor even socialism, it merely means that the proper function of the modern state is to insure the common good of all, by putting at the disposal of various social groups all the legal and technical means which they need in order to achieve their own just ends. Neither the domination of disorganized individuals by some totalitarian state, nor the economic and social anarchy of a purely political democracy, is the goal, but rather the state as protector and

helper of these social groups outside of which there can be no real personal liberty.

Politics alone can give us such a state, and it will, provided its idea be clear in our own minds and that we know how to make it clear to others.

Now, the best way for us to make it clear is to show how it would work in particular cases, which, of course, may vary in different countries.

Let us look, for instance, at that basic social group, the family. Are we going to let the state directly take care of children, as it gladly did in Nazi Germany and is doing in Soviet Russia? Or are we going to leave the parents entirely to themselves, under pretense that any intervention of the state in family affairs entails the death of family liberties? But what do parents want for their children, if not food, health, and a good education? Every time the state does something to help them in achieving these ends—say, every time the state does something in order that all children may get what their parents want them to get—is that Marxist statism or socialist justice? Statism exists where the state aims to do the work of families, not where it helps families in doing their own work themselves.

Or consider economic problems: Is the state going to avoid such questions? Or is it going to become the only employer of a nation of employees? Neither solution is satisfactory. It cannot remain neutral, for the simple reason that, in such problems, the very life of the country is at stake. All citizens need such necessities as food, shelter, coal, electricity, and means of transportation. Yet, on the other hand, the state has no business to take charge of such matters. What the state has to do everywhere is to favour and to regulate professional, commercial and industrial organizations, becoming the natural arbiter between employers and employees, to the greater benefit of all.

Here again we are not dealing with words. Very far from it. Just try to imagine by how different the situation would be from what it is if our respective countries were organized along such lines. We all live in organized political democracies, which means that our countries enjoy written constitutions and systems of political representation. But
what about labour problems? What have political democracies done in order to solve them? True enough, there are syndicates and unions of workers, but such syndicates or unions of workers may become so powerful that a simple decision of their chiefs will be enough to stop the whole economic life of a country.

I could mention the present coal strike in Great Britain, but the recent general strike of railways in France is a still clearer example of such a case. As a result, the whole life of the country was at once paralyzed, but it is remarkable that nobody ever said exactly by whom the strike was called. It was even impossible to say who was a striker and who was not. In France, practically all trains start from Paris; so a strike of railways in Paris immediately becomes a general strike. On the second day of the strike, the station-master of Strasbourg phoned to his Minister and asked him: “Do you think that I should consider my men as being on strike?” “Well,” the Minister said, “you should know more about it than I do. Are they working?” “No, they are not.” “Then they are strikers.” “Well, I am not so sure,” the station-master answered; “how can they work? There are no trains!”

This looks like a joke, but let us see one of its consequences. When, after the strike, the question arose in Parliament as to whether or not the railwaymen should be paid as if there had been no strike, the government first decided that it should except the strikers. Yet, when it became apparent that nobody could say who had been a striker and who had not, the railwaymen all received their weekly wages for having done nothing during the week. This is what I call economic anarchy, and the only way out of it is to organize economic democracy. The state alone is qualified and competent to organize it.

All modern political constitutions should be progressively complemented by economic constitutions, providing for the representation of all economic interests, ensuring free regular elections for all to this end and providing that no handful of irresponsible leaders are able to decide for thousands—or hundreds of thousands—of helpless workers, whether they are going to work or not, and under what conditions. We have no other choice, for indeed, where labour will not be organized by the state in a democratic way, labour itself is bound sooner or later to fall victim to the state. There then will be no more strikes than there are now in Russia. If that is the kind of order we want to get, we have only to stay just as we are. Pure political democracy is but a half-way house on the road to totalitarian slavery in the political as well as in the economic orders.

Such, I believe, is the task that now lies ahead of us. It is a political task. Indeed, it is the political task of the day in all civilized countries. I have little doubt that, whatever its name, the party that will undertake it is ultimately certain to win.

But undertake it we must, and after trying to form a clear and distinct idea of our own political creed, we should proceed at once to a technical study of its practical application. If we do so, everybody will see that we mean business and what kind of business we do mean. Nobody will then be able to frighten us away from our task by calling us bad names, because we will clearly know what that task is. It is a noble task since it is, by adding social justice to political justice, to carry democracy to its supreme point of perfection. Here again there is no other choice, for unless we complete it by social and economical democracy we are doomed to lose political democracy as well. They stand or fall together.

Is it too ambitious to weld a society where man will remain the master of the machines he makes instead of becoming their slave? Where the right to private property would mean the right of all men to private property? Where the state would take a hand in everybody’s business, not to dominate him, but to help him? Where its authority would seek no other justification than to facilitate and to guarantee the flowering of all personal liberties?

If we think that this is too ambitious, then we had better keep clear of politics and let conditions take their own disastrous course. Economic anarchy will go on fighting its losing battle against self-organized labour and ultimately lose it. Then Marxist oppression will arrive, the normal outcome of economic anarchy, but not its remedy.
Canada Looks Ahead

A Series of Addresses and Papers Presented at the National Summer Conference of the Young Liberal Federation of Canada, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, September 1 to 5, 1947.