

The following passages extracted from Lord Reith's autobiography
Into The Wind.

Page 1.

Introduction:

MEMOIRS. There must be some reason for writing them. Publicity ? To excite sympathy, vindicate oneself, discredit others ? To make money ? To tell a story that should be interesting ? To record events - cause, sequence, effect - and so perchance make some contribution to history ? That others may profit from one's own experiences, fortune and misfortune, success and failure - a contribution to the art of living ? Or merely to occupy oneself ? However vague the motive, it had to be done.

There is material enough. Experiences sufficient in number, variety, interest. They are here to hand; recorded in a diary kept without break since 1910 - about four million words of it. Some use had to be made of it.

Capacity to select and present ? Criteria of selection ? One will try to tell the truth; nothing but the truth. To tell the whole truth, exactly what happened, what one man thought or said about another, what oneself thought or said, might be improper or indecent, unkind or hurtful. For value in the story this cannot always be avoided. But the writer will be as much hurt as anyone.

Pages 169-171

Public Corporations & Democracy

More thoughts at the end of 1932 about his pro bono publico ~~xx~~ experiment in management. No precedents; the BBC must create them in this field as well as in broadcasting. Few realised what was happening. Relationship between BBC and State, and between BBC and public. The establishment of the authority, its constitution, powers and duties; its remote control by, and measure of accountability to, supreme authority; its wide autonomy otherwise; its own conception of responsibility; its methods of discharging that responsibility; all these involved the creation of precedents. The BBC was serving a high democratic purpose by means which in the literal sense were certainly not democratic.

And that led one to reflect whether democratic principle and purpose could best and quickest be served by democratic means as commonly understood. The BBC might be considered autocratic or arbitrary in attitude and procedure. It had the courage of its convictions; it did what it believed was in the public interest. Ought that not to apply to anybody vested with authority and responsibility ? There was no electoral process anywhere in BBC constitution and procedure. The governing body was nominated, not elected; the programmes were compiled not to meet but to anticipate the popular vote. One knew of what sort they would otherwise have

been. Here was a lesson for other public bodies from Parliament down.

Did it mean that it was undesirable to have elected representatives associated with the management of public services? Log-rolling; ears to the ground; fear of the elector; everything submitted to the criterion of the vote. Timidity, compromise, mediocrity - were these the inevitable concomitants of democracy?

Democracy used to mean simply government by the people; government in which the people retained supreme power, exercising it directly or indirectly through some system of delegated authority. The term applied, therefore, to the manner in which governments were chosen and dismissed; though even in elementary definitions some formula expressive of equality of rights without hereditary or arbitrary difference in rank or privilege must be included. Primarily, therefore, a means and machinery, rather than a final purpose. For many people, no doubt, democracy meant little more than the extent to which the State was willing - without reciprocal obligation - to subsidise its citizens. To others a practically indiscriminate franchise.

Well, the 1931 general election had been hailed as a vindication and triumph of democracy; what comment had come from the same quarters in 1929; what would it be if there were a turnover in 1936? Was the elector alternately a personification of critical intelligence and of deluded stupidity? And was the electoral method satisfactory; did the country secure thereby the best potential rulers - aristocrats of character and intelligence? There must be some principle of ethics or economics to justify equality of electoral power to an intelligent, responsible, respectable citizen, a producer of by hand or brain, contributor in large or small measure to the wellbeing and wealth of the State; and to another unintelligent, irresponsible, disreputable, a lifelong charge on the State.

A good deal was heard about rationalisation; it was in a sense shameful, since it meant making reasonable something which had been allowed to become unreasonable. A good deal also heard about nationalisation. The requirement was something more than the one and less than the other. Nationalised rationalisation in fact; and of this broadcasting was the outstanding example. Some public services and basic industries were in a parlous state. There might be assignable blame or no blame. Lack of enterprise, overweening ambition, inefficient management; or just economic circumstance. There was overdue need for nationalised rationalisation of the coal mining industry and of transport in all forms including air.

Enough in all conscience to be done nationally and internationally. At home monstrous abuses - unchecked suburban sprawl, desecration and vandalism of the countryside among them; utter irresponsibility in so many spheres. Abroad what faith or hope in the League of Nations? Was

it still expected that disarmament, security and stability would come that way ? The everlasting search for formulae, which if found at all, served only for a moment to conceal irreconcilable disagreement of outlook and intention under the cloak of ineffective compromise. Nationalism might after all be the most potent instrument of internationalism. Still a determining part for Commonwealth and Empire to play, the part that Britain played of old. The world needed a reincarnation of the spirit which, with all its faults, was typified there - that blend of individualism and altruism which could only work dynamically. Was it now too late ?

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Postscriptum

Maybe foolish to be intelligent; to know one's mind; to move quickly and directly to objectives; to say what one believes; to follow right in scorn of consequence. But this much the search has shown - I have lacked ambition in the ordinary sense; utterly lacked it; been utterly incapable of the devices and expedients which ambition compels. I have only been minded to do with all ~~my~~ might whatsoever came to my hand to do. As well as it could possibly be done. And in the shortest possible time. And even though nobody would notice if it had been much less well done or had taken much longer. To keep the hand occupied. Both hands. All the time.

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