9 Conclusion: Galbraith and the Emancipation of Belief

Galbraith is not a prophet of doom. Rather, he is an optimist convinced that the future will be better than the past and that the radical social critic such as himself will help to make it so. The social critic notices a flaw in the existing fabric of society, brings it to the attention of the community, stimulates redress of grievances by provoking political controversy, and thus performs the essential function of mobilising public opinion on the side of progress.

Criticism is the means by which a society acquires free will and is thus 'the engine of change' in all open societies. Beware the collectivity that does not loudly debate its weaknesses: 'The society that does not have a similar need to publicize its shortcomings may be thought by superficial men to have no shortcomings. In fact, it may merely be leaving them uncorrected.'

The emancipation of belief waits on social criticism; and Galbraith, recognising that three key groups of critics are progressive politicians, reformist intellectuals and unorthodox economists, has managed to have a foot in all three camps.

(a) Progressive politicians

Galbraith has never himself actually held an important political post (having resisted the temptation to stand as Governor or Senator in Massachusetts or Vermont), but he has nonetheless consistently been active in the radical wing of the Democratic Party. Thus he was on the campaign staff of Adlai Stevenson in the 1952 and 1956 elections, was close to John Kennedy, seconded the nomination of Eugene McCarthy at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, and offered considerable support to George McGovern in
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1972. He was National Chairman of the Americans for Democratic Action from 1967 to 1969.

Galbraith’s relationship with President Kennedy is of particular interest. He had known the family for some time, having tutored the brothers at Harvard, and as early as 1958 (the same year as The Affluent Society was on the best-seller lists, two years after Stevenson’s second defeat and at a time when few Democrats looked to Kennedy) was already introducing the young Senator to influential academics in the Boston area. Galbraith was thus not just a valuable but an early supporter: ‘As late as 1959 Esquire polled one hundred professors throughout the country about their choice for the Presidency. There were only two votes for Kennedy. One was Galbraith’s, and the other that of Crane Brinton, the Harvard historian, who said (to Galbraith’s considerable surprise) that he favored Kennedy because the candidate appeared to be a disciple of Galbraith’s economics. Kennedy immediately wrote Galbraith, thanking him for preventing a shutout.’3 Galbraith canvassed widely for Kennedy in the 1960 election (important not only because of Galbraith’s personal fame and because the Harvard name accorded added status and authority but also because Galbraith was, after all, a Scottish Protestant supporting an Irish Catholic), wrote speeches for Kennedy to deliver (as he had previously done for Stevenson) and is the author of probably the most famous phrase in Kennedy’s inaugural address — ‘Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.’4 In return, he was able to bask in and share the Kennedy charisma and the glamour of Camelot, to circumvent the bureaucracy and communicate directly with the leader (as when he personally advised Kennedy in 1962 against American involvement in Vietnam) and to demonstrate his own political acumen (notably, when, as American Ambassador in India, he dealt successfully with both the Indian occupation of Goa and the Indo-Chinese border dispute, and also managed to reduce the role played by the CIA in the subcontinent).

(b) Reformist intellectuals

Galbraith believes that intellectuals such as himself, by influencing public opinion, help to alter the attitudes of incumbent politicians and also help to create a climate in which true progressives (men who can without difficulty distinguish ‘the public interest from the