5

Virginia Woolf as Policy Analyst

Craufurd D. Goodwin

The collection of friends known as the Bloomsbury Group has been described variously as a ‘school’, a ‘set’, a ‘clique’, a ‘coterie’ and in other less complimentary terms. There was difference of opinion within the Group over who the members were, and even over whether it existed. The hard core of the Group comprised Lytton Strachey, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Clive and Vanessa Bell, John Maynard Keynes, Desmond McCarthy, Roger Fry, E. M. Forster, Duncan Grant and Saxon Sydney-Turner. Others often included are Dora Carrington, David and Angelica Garnett, Quentin Bell and Frances Partridge. Some observers have seen the Group as simply an extension of the ‘Apostles’, the secret society to which several of the original male members belonged while at Cambridge, and where they rejoiced in profound discussions of such topics as truth, beauty and love.¹ Some have tended to think of the Group as mainly a pleasant environment in which brilliant and creative people could relax away from engagement with the activities for which they are individually well-known: the writing of novels, the construction of economic theory, the painting of pictures and literary criticism.² It may be useful to think of Bloomsbury in still another way as something like a ‘think tank’, people gathered together, in part at least to examine and propose solutions to demanding problems of the day. Even though the term ‘think tank’, did not gain currency until after World War II the institution appeared early in the twentieth century, sometimes centred around a discipline like philosophy or economics (the Vienna Circle in Austria or the National Bureau of Economic Research in the United States), or a new political ideology like socialism (The Fabian Society, with which Leonard and Virginia Woolf were involved), sometimes around a single problem like foreign policy (the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and The Royal Institute for International Affairs,
Chatham House). Sometimes a think tank reflected the optimism of a wealthy patron that it could do good works (The Brookings Institution and the Russell Sage Foundation). That Virginia Woolf understood the concept of a think tank can be seen in her short story “The Society.” One of the characters suggests that when addressing problems they should go to the heart of the matter, human behaviour, advice that she followed in her own work: ‘All this time we have been talking of aeroplanes, factories, and money. Let us talk about men themselves and their arts, for that is the heart of the matter’ (CSF, p. 131).

Think tanks were the result of several historical trends. By the end of the nineteenth century the franchise had increased to such an extent that many new voters demanded a say in public affairs; in their zeal to understand the world around them these voters provided an enthusiastic audience for the publications and pronouncements of think tanks. Business entrepreneurs often were equally impatient about reform and were willing to pay for the generation of new ideas. Academics, long consigned intellectually to the ivory tower while events engulfed them outside, welcomed the opportunity to extend their professional lives through think tanks and make use of skills that they were convinced could be useful to society. Governments, though usually ambivalent about the existence of full-time critics, found many ways in which think tanks could be useful to them. Typically early think tanks were multi-disciplinary, experimental and ephemeral. Bloomsbury qualifies on all these counts. A distinguishing characteristic of the successful think tanks is that they considered success to lie in their capacity to illuminate a problem, not necessarily to solve it or to engage in current struggles surrounding it. In this paper the policy interests that were addressed by Bloomsbury are briefly set forth, and their distinctive method of approach described. Their engagement with current events surrounding the issues that concerned them is not examined here; for the most part this has been covered well in the numerous biographies and monographs that have been published about the individual members. Then a ‘think tank reading’ of Virginia Woolf’s particular contribution is undertaken. Her works are examined alongside the analytical works of other ‘Bloomsberries’, which suggests that they used similar methods and pursued similar goals. Beyond Virginia Woolf’s achievements as a novelist she may be seen also as a contributor to the collective policy engagement of Bloomsbury. The thesis of this paper is that there was a distinctive Bloomsbury way of addressing problems and Virginia Woolf employed it in the same way as did other members of the Bloomsbury Group.