

Active Citizenship as Political Obligation

Tony Skillen

Rousseau says in *The Social Contract*:

As soon as public service ceases to be the chief business of the citizens, and they would rather serve with their money than with their persons, the state is not far from its fall. When it is necessary to march out to war, they pay troops and stay home; when it is necessary to meet in council, they name deputies and stay home. By reason of idleness and money, they end by having soldiers to enslave their country and representatives to sell it. I am far from taking the common view: I hold enforced labour to be less opposed to liberty than taxes.¹

In the Introductory chapter of *On Liberty*, Mill writes:

There are also many positive acts for the benefit of others which he may rightfully be compelled to perform; such as to give evidence in a court of justice; to bear his fair share in the common defence or in any other joint work necessary to the interest of the society of which he enjoys the protection; and to perform certain acts of individual beneficence, such as saving a fellow-creature's life, or interposing himself to protect the defenceless against ill-usage, things which whenever it is obviously a man's duty to do, he may rightfully be made responsible to society for not doing. A person may cause evil to others, not only by his actions but by his inaction, and in either case he is justly accountable to them for the injury...²

Rousseau and Mill argue that forced activity can be justified in a free society. Their emphases in these extracts differ. Rousseau is wholly concerned with the necessity of 'public' activity, activity focused on the maintenance of the 'body politic'. Mill's concern is mainly with the necessity of 'private' action to benefit 'others'. I would suggest that these concerns could be seen as complementary within a wider view of 'community membership'. It should be stressed that both writers, one talking about public, the other about private virtues, are as clear as T. H. Green was to be about the collision between 'compulsion' and 'virtue'. What they share, though, is a sense not just of the desirability, but of the necessity of 'active citizenship', expressed in the countenancing, if needed, of coerced activity.

Just how far these views of the 'free citizen' are from most modern ones can be gathered from the way the notion of 'citizenship', newly dusted down, has been represented in recent discussion. 'Charter 88', for example, argues for a Bill of Rights, for constitutional safeguards of individual freedom against official dictatorship.³ It does not argue for extending voting rights in the areas of industry and education. It does not stress the need for workers' rights and for a minimal income to make choice a reality

in a world where goods are commodities. Charter 88, it seems to me, is an amendment but not an extension of ideas about citizenship associated with T. H. Marshall's 1947 essay 'Citizenship and Social Class'.⁴ Marshall distinguished three mutually implicated but historically evolved dimensions of citizenship: 'Civil', in which individual liberties are protected; 'Political', in which democratic rights are secured; and 'Social', in which employment, education, housing, health and care guarantees form a universal 'welfare' foundation of contribution and benefit without which citizenship is a formality. Charter 88's advance on Marshall is largely in its arguing for a formal constitution as well as indicating that 'social citizenship' must itself be secured by 'civil' and 'political rights'.

Nowhere is there any notion of 'free citizenship' having among its constituents the sorts of activity, voluntary or coerced, referred to by Mill and Rousseau. Charter 88 is all about rights-against and rights-to-control structures of the state. The duties of citizenship are exhausted, it would appear, in not violating such rights and in paying the taxes necessary to maintain the professionally staffed structures of the free democratic society. Everyday life, it would seem, would go on in the normal way (though better) with more frequent punctuations for meetings and elections. Would Benjamin Constant's descendants stir from the television or abandon their D.I.Y. and moonlighting?

With this leftish liberalism is contrasted the 'active citizenship' occasionally advocated by the Conservative Front Bench. While Margaret Thatcher has spoken hopefully of the charity enjoined by Christian faith as cementing what the pursuit of private wealth might, uninhibited, tear asunder,⁵ Douglas Hurd has promoted the term 'active citizenship'.

Underpinning our social policy are three traditions – the diffusion of power, civic obligation and voluntary service – which are central to conservative philosophy and rooted in British (particularly English) History.

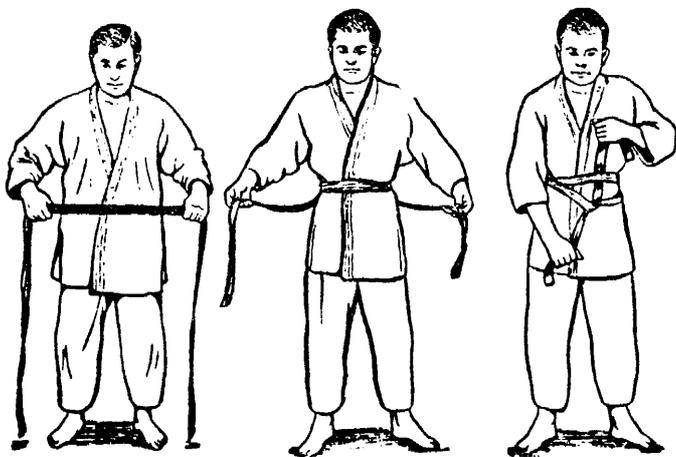
The diffusion of power is a bulwark against despotism and corruption, and the key to active and responsible citizenship. Men and women are social beings. But the left's picture of a society dominated by the relationship of citizenship to state is a pallid image of reality. Men (only?) have affection and allegiance for many collective organizations – from a soccer club to a choral society, or even a political party. But the strongest loyalties are to family, neighbourhood and nation. 'No cold relation is a zealous citizenship,' said Burke. 'To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society is the

first principles (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link of the series by which we proceed toward the love of our country, and of mankind...

... Thus parents will gain a bigger say in education, council tenants will get more control over the management of their estates ... neighbourhood watch schemes ... more responsive than local councils ... give their time freely to the huge and thriving number of British charities.

... We need to encourage the idea that civic responsibilities too are the property of all. They have been democratised. ... If there is one lesson which socialism has taught us, it is that governments cannot legislate for neighbourliness. Compulsion by the state implies not fulfilment, but the absence or failure of personal responsibility. Governments can no more easily create good citizens than could Dr. Frankenstein create a human being ... amazed at the modern socialist notion that it is more virtuous to lie back and be taxed than to work hard for yourself and your neighbour.⁶

I would defend the Hurd instinct against the charge that the chosen arenas of activity are non-political and entail virtually no power. It is one thing to have a lot of power in a small arena, another to have a little power in a large one. Nor are there no 'politics' in tenants' associations, soccer clubs or school councils, or, for that matter, in the organization of charities. Always there are divisive issues of priority, of direction, of interests. Of course Hurd's patrician 'platoonism' plays down such conflicts and constricts the arenas of activity envisaged.



Hurd stresses the importance of voluntariness. Compulsion, he says, signals absence of virtue, of personal responsibility. He equates this with the impossibility of 'legislating for neighbourliness', as if legislation cannot open up avenues and remove constraints on 'neighbourliness'. More to the point, he does not make it clear why, if there are 'responsibilities' that we ought to accept to our 'neighbourhood' or to our 'neighbour', there are duties which, unlike say the duty to pay taxes or to obey all sorts of other norms, should not be legally sanctioned at least to the extent of being statutorily supported e.g. in regard to expenses, time allocation etc. There are some reasons, of course, but they are, as Mill argues, pragmatic ones. The upshot is that Hurd's 'active citizens' are a minority with, as he puts it, 'time and money to spare'. Having elevated, albeit briefly, the notion of 'active

citizenship' to being a keystone in the Tory edifice, a fundamental ideal of political life, it emerges that active citizenship is a minor decoration and a fig leaf to conceal cuts in state welfare provision. The notion is limited in its spheres of action and restricted in practice to those with 'time and money to spare and the disposition to spare it in altruistic directions. Unless we have now a two- or three-tier concept of citizenship, it is difficult to see all this as a new 'definition of citizenship', or to see how we could have a 'social policy founded upon ideals of active and responsible citizenship'.

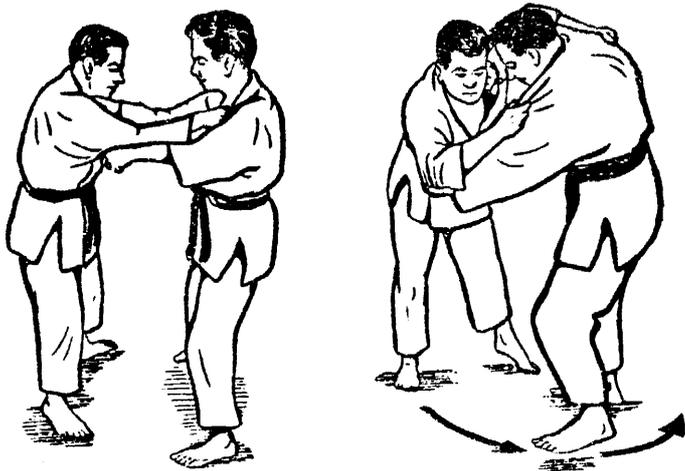
Since, then, Douglas Hurd has initiated a Speaker's Commission on Citizenship which includes the Prince of Wales, himself the proposer late last year of a new 'army' of active citizens between the ages of 16 and 25.⁷ The Commission's draft report speaks of a 'fourth dimension' of citizenship, in addition, as it happens, to Marshall's three. As if recognizing the institutional bloodlessness of Hurd's original discussion, the Commission and the Prince propose that an army of about 100,000 'volunteers' be selected from schools, colleges and industry, be supported, either privately (with firms *required* to release and support them) or publicly for a total of three months. Such work would receive 'recognition' through a new 'high-status, non-political awards system'. The work proposed comprises welfare activities and environmental repair. Systems of supervision and control are to be proposed.

At present the Commission does not appear to envisage a universal responsibility or right. It neither expects nor, it seems, will it allow all young people to devote three months to community service. We appear to be offered a selective system so that, if penal practices go as planned, one may have to be either very good to be allowed to enjoy community service, or very bad to be forced to endure it. Not, as it stands, a satisfactory model of democratic citizenship. Nor, with its royal paraphernalia of awards, statuses and eligibilities, does it appear as a good model of education in the virtues of citizenship. Despite the Prince's castigation of the cash nexus, despite the presence of eminent Labour Party and educational authorities, the scheme as proposed threatens to add the invidious quest for prestige to that for wealth as sanctified social values. We have drifted away from both 'democratic responsibility' and the 'good neighbour' when the New Good Samaritan needs to have been selected to sort out the Wayside Problem and to be given applause and a career boost on meritorious completion. Still, it's a step...

Let me return to something like first principles. Classical liberalism has tended to place the self-interest of private individuals at the base of political authority, justified by the 'contract' to satisfy those interests. Hence the same basic values at play in civil society (which must, after all, be maintained as an authoritative coercive, often at the expense of individual interests) are the foundations of the state. This generates all sorts of problems (free riders, non-beneficiaries) at the level of principle. But just as you can go a long way towards understanding the way the economy actually works by accepting Adam Smith's egoistic axioms, so the mutual isolation and indifference of the modern state's 'citizens' is a fundamental feature of our political experience. Marx wrote of the state gobbling up what had been the 'common interest' of society, crunching it as 'the general interest', into its own 'private property', leaving the 'citizens' confronting each other as purely private egos, and then justifying its own powers by the tendency of these private egos to tear each other apart. The state's justification, its necessity, lies in its capacity to maintain justice, toleration, decency, peace and so on, among its people. Ironically, in the manner of tragic necessity, it tends to undermine the conditions of these very virtues. Moreover, the state itself needs these virtues and the social cohesion they engender, if it is itself

to survive as a legitimate and legitimating power. If people cease to give a damn, they cease to think they have a reason for supporting the state except insofar as they see that support as a condition of it supporting them. Yet it always tends to 'bureaucratic degeneracy'.

But these issues have revived recently, and the talk of 'active citizenship' has emerged, in the context of the welfare state. Again, at the abstract level of principle, one might argue that the 'welfare guarantee' can be seen by liberals as the state's 'bargain' with the citizenry to secure universal allegiance – 'all benefit'. But more concretely, on the contrary, the institutions of the



welfare state have been linked with, even blamed for, the 'irresponsible society', where, as the pious Rhodes Boyson put it, 'no one cares' because it's the council's or government's 'job' to 'care'. Hence, your relationship of mutual need and mutual aid to your fellows is supplemented by your 'right' to certain benefits and your liability to taxes and other compulsory payments. And so, allegedly and up to a point truly, we have ever-expanding demands – 'needs' – on the one hand and ever-contracting willingness to cough up the wherewithal to meet them – 'taxpayers' revolt'. This represents a classical form of alienation: as contributor I resent my unrecognized self as recipient, while as recipient I am after everything I can get. Moreover, the mediating institutions, the 'tax-man' at one end and the 'social worker' at the other acquire the characters of bureaucratic authoritarianism, opposite qualities to those in terms of which the welfare state seeks to recommend itself. Ask anyone who works in the 'voluntary sector', with the deprived or oppressed, what they think of police and social workers – 'bastards'.

Unless we are wives, mothers, daughters or daughters-in-law looking after family members, the 'welfare state' leaves us free to neglect each other while it makes a mess of caring for us. Now I want to address not only the failures in 'delivery', but the atrophy, or rather the abortion, of social activity that all this entails. And, against the 'politicos' of Charter 88 I would support the idea that 'neighbourliness' is a root of social membership, hence, *inter alia*, of the state. It is a mistake to think that radically extending rights of participants in decisions about how and on what state-paid employees will spend their time will solve the problems of citizenship and community. In the absence of direct and mutual aid, our experience and appreciation of our fellows and their needs will be as peripheral, fragile, and ephemeral as our response to a Telethon campaign. 'Social work', I am saying, needs to characterise and consolidate – to give substance and meaning to

– the institutional social fabric local, regional, national, global.

Am I arguing for some pacific version of 'National ('Community', 'Euro. ...') Service', for conscription? Not till now. But I now want to put two kinds of considerations in support of this scary idea.

First I want to turn Robert Nozick's famous argument against taxes on its head: 'Taxation of earnings from labour,' he says, 'is on a par with forced labour' and trades on the egregiousness of the idea that the unemployed should 'have to work for the benefit of the needy'.⁸ I think Nozick's assimilation is basically right. Of course you are not forced by the tax-collector state to do *this*, you are forced to yield up part of your income from whatever work you ('choose to') do if you ('choose to') do anything for an income. But this still means that whatever you do, a proportion of the time and effort you put in is perforce, for the tax-collector state. And, though I don't want to smudge important contrasts, the word 'choose' was bracketed and quoted to remind us of the pressures, the need, to work in the first place.

So, if

- (a) there are institutions of choice of kind, place, time of 'community service', including, say, overseas work at one extreme, work in one's own street or even home at another,
- (b) there are liberal rather than draconian sanctions and liberal provision for exemptions, excuses, objections and alternatives,
- (c) there is financial recognition of the work (which is not to say a *wage* so much as a making-possible, a 'support'),
- (d) the work does not oppressively tie up individuals' lives,
- (e) and there is a measure of community and workers' as distinct from official and professional control over the work – recognizing its *political* character,

I do not see an objection in principle to 'community service' as part of citizens' obligations. It is a further task to delineate the restricted area of 'socially constitutive activity' that term would pick out.



Secondly, the arguments I offered against the charitable and public-spirited 'active citizen' ideal of Douglas Hurd, Prince Charles and the Speaker's Commission were arguments against minority activism. Minority activation rests on inequality in 'time and money to spare' and in the Prince's scheme confers inequality in 'non-material recognition', prestige and, of course, career prospects. This institutes a new kind of dual citizenship – active and passive. Now unless, like Peregrine Worsthorne, you are prepared to go along that road, forgetting perhaps that citizens grade 2 may feel even less attached and obligated than they do already, this is an unappealing road.

Moreover, the 'Charley's Army', 'Hurd's Platoon' idea, while it would no doubt usefully supplement 'state welfare', and reach parts the latter cannot, reinforces the familiar damaging, disrespectful, division of society into active givers and passive receivers, betraying the potentiality for mutual give-and-take essential for 'active citizenship' to function as a democratic value.

Now this ideal could, and as Rousseau and Mill held, would ideally be realised voluntarily. (Imagine a community where it is taken for granted that every available member grabs their shovel when the snow lies thick.) But Benjamin Constant shrewdly observed the modern age is marked by a privatisation of spirit. In more ways than Marx delineated, it atomises us, so that today, our very entertainments are both passive and semi-solitary. Against these centrifugal forces the state is uniquely placed to act for once in the right (peactime!) direction. This it could do in the form of *enabling* legislation: legislation that guaranteed income support, availability for up to so many hours/days/weeks of community service organized with the help of state professional managers or guides. This might, suitably bolstered, be enough.

But I doubt it. For one thing, if 'active citizenship' is to be the saving 'fourth dimension', it needs to be culturally inscribed and fostered within the educational process, at present dominated by the classroom, a sphere of political (and too often of intellectual) passivity. 'Civics' classes and R. E. pieties are no substitute for civic practice – linked to research discussion and democratic decision-making from the earliest years. So would begin the instituting of 'active citizenship' as part of the identity-formation of social members. It is my view that 'active citizenship' is liable to be experienced as a good and a necessity by individuals, so that it has the potential to become part of the obligatory, sanctioned fabric of social life without being resented or felt oppressive, but on the contrary being recognised as an essential component of democratic life.

This ideal is not only one that is worth pursuing for its own sake, as an Aristotelian virtue, almost a bonus, a *quality* missing from the possible in modern social life. 'Scientists' talk in a post-Malthusian way about modern medicine's overproduction of babies and old people. The assumption, based on the low caring capacities of modern Western societies, is that, since more means even worse, radical modes of population control and selective euthenasia will be necessary. Meanwhile it is not, in any town, necessary to walk far to see the tawdriness, boredom, loneliness and poverty that mocks our affluence. When I have used the word 'need' I have meant it. Simply at the material, 'utilitarian' level, there is a need for a *huge* escalation of caring work in the world today. And (the answer to those whose fear is the replacement of public professionals and public money by bunches of amateurs), one day in the field is worth years of alarming documentaries to

advertise the need for this escalation.

I have been arguing rather defensively and even sheepishly, sheltering behind Mill and even Nozick. But, as every educator of the disabled or handicapped could tell any schoolteacher, self-respect and autonomy require experience not only of rewarded, but valued achievement, achievement which is experienced as entitling one to be heard (to be taken seriously) and as bringing one into community of such entitlement. In the absence of that sense, a very 'empirical' matter, rooted in primitive responses of fellowship, cooperation and appreciation, the gathering of citizens lacks the basis of mutual respect.

This connects with the need to reject the 'platoon' or 'army' model, with its authoritarian repression of the need for discussion of definitions, priorities and approaches. Ironically, against our liberal prejudices we come back to Rousseau's '*citoyen*' ideal. For what starts out looking like an apolitical, safe, set of concerns, such as 'visiting the old and the sick', 'child minding' and 'repairing environmental damage', rapidly reveal themselves as politically loaded and educational issues. Constitutive of sociability, such activities seem to me fundamental to the *fellowship* that makes politics something other than a power play of interests.⁹

Notes

- 1 Rousseau, Book III, Ch. XI (p. 235 in Everyman edition, translation by G. D. H. Cole).
- 2 Mill in *Utilitarianism*, ed. Mary Warnock, Fontana, London, 1962, pp. 136–37.
- 3 'Don't be a subject, be a citizen' exhort Charter 88 leaflets.
- 4 Marshall in *Sociology at the Crossroads*, Heinemann, London, 1963.
- 5 See the full address quoted in *God, Man and Mrs Thatcher*, by Jonathan Raban, Chatto and Windus, London, 1989, pp. 7–20.
- 6 In *The New Statesman*, 29 April 1988, p. 14.
- 7 See Anthony Barnett's 'Charlie's Army' for a (tendentious) summary; *New Statesman*, 22 September 1989.
- 8 Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Blackwells, Oxford, 1974, p. 169.
- 9 For a more developed picture of 'the economy of care', see *Not for Sale*, the Swedish National Youth Council Report of 1981, as presented by Benny Henrikson, Aberdeen University Press, 1983. See also my *Ruling Illusions*, Harvester, 1978, and 'Welfare State Versus Welfare Society?', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1985.

Announcement

Radical PHILOSOPHY

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Community as Compulsion?

A Reply to Skillen on Citizenship and the State

Gregory Elliott and Peter Osborne

In common with much of the Left, Tony Skillen sets out in search of an alternative model of citizenship to the Good Samaritan or Active Citizen recently promoted by Conservatives to compensate for the ravages of economic liberalism. Yet he is concerned to distinguish his own proposals from the constitutionalism characteristic of *Charter 88* and related left-liberal initiatives. The notion of 'active citizenship', he insists, must be rescued from its travesty at the hands of Douglas Hurd. For citizenship to be genuinely 'free', it will have to be both *active* and *universal*—neither the negative liberty of *Charter 88*, nor the 'minority activism' of voluntary service. Political realism requires that the attainment of such an ideal involves, in the first instance at least, 'coerced activity'. If needs be, we shall be forced to be free.

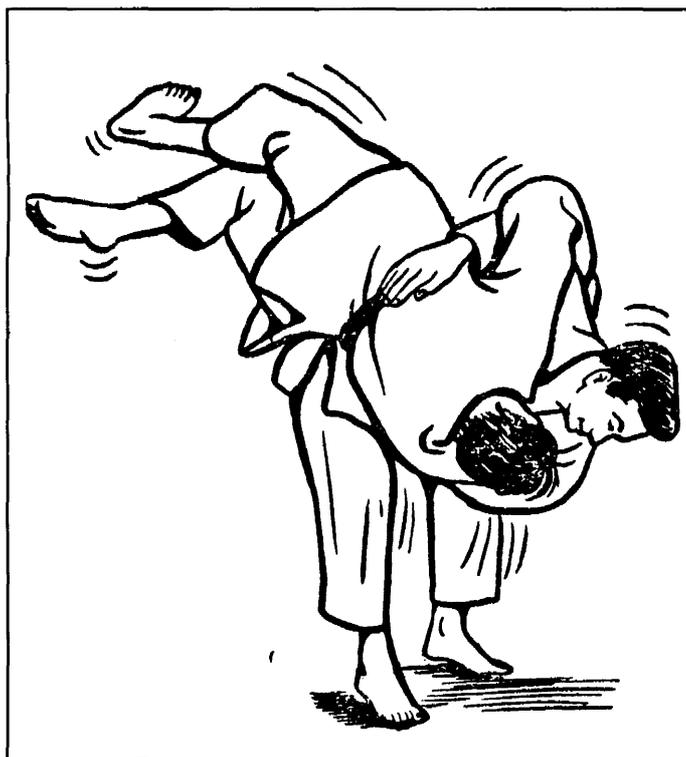
What is at issue here is the interpretation (and instantiation) of the third of T. H. Marshall's dimensions of citizenship: social rights and duties. For Skillen there are two main problems with the form customarily assumed by these in the welfare state: public provision financed by taxation. First, the 'bureaucratic authoritarianism' of 'tax-man' and 'social worker'; the involuntary contribution, insensitive delivery and social control of the 'tax-collector state'. Secondly, the restriction of obligation to the

essentially 'passive' duties of non-avoidance of taxation and respect for other people's rights which, it is argued, has the effect of reproducing rather than ameliorating (let alone transforming) the atomised individualism of bourgeois society. Welfare capitalism, we are told, 'leave us free to neglect each other while it makes a mess of caring for us'. To surmount these problems, Skillen suggests a substantive socialisation of citizenship via compulsory social service: the 'direct and mutual aid' indispensable to an active community.

What are we to make of this novel conjugation of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*? Perhaps its most striking feature is its apparently unqualified endorsement of the New Right critique of the welfare state for inefficiency, intrusiveness and inhibition of individual responsibility — or, as Skillen puts it rather more graphically, its 'abortion of social activity'. It is one thing to acknowledge the very real limitations of bureaucratic welfare provision, quite another to discount its manifest material benefits in favour of a communitarianism the feasibility of which remains unexamined. What price political dealiation in a world of palpable deprivation? What, indeed, of the mechanics of this putative dealiation itself?

It is here, at the strictly political level, that the contradictions of 'active citizenship as political obligation' are most stark. On the one hand, Skillen is concerned to overcome the passivity of the merely constitutional universalism of a left-liberalism which would leave the securement of social rights to a new civil and political settlement. He is thus led to identify properly social citizenship with some new version of Hurd's model of active, voluntary citizenship. On the other hand, however, he is anxious to avoid the selectivity and privilege inherent in existing forms of voluntary service. He is thus led, for reasons of democratic principle, to uphold the requirement of universality alongside that of activity. But at this point, the dictates of activism outweigh the desirability of voluntarism. Hence the spectre of coercion. Until such time as the 'educational process' of active citizenship creates the citizens it presupposes, the scenario is one of compulsion. 'Against ... [the] centrifugal forces [of atomisation] the state is uniquely placed to act for once in the right (peacetime!) direction.' What began as a critique of bureaucratic statism in the name of community terminates in a plan for the construction of community in a centripetal state. Freedom is deferred to a future in which, in any case, it amounts to no more than a recognition of the necessity of obligation. The exasperated logic of a libertarianism which posits the state as the solvent of its own 'bureaucratic degeneracy' tells its own story.

Skillen is admirably frank about the authoritarian dimension to his argument. He is rather less clear about its practical implications. For a start, who or what is to perform the requisite function



of beneficent dictatorship? Why are we to suppose that those in power have an interest in education for citizenship, or that those with the interest can acquire the power (who educates the educator?) Above all, there is the question of the voluntary cession of power (who guards the guardians, and why assume that they will wither away?). The antinomies of this kind of pedagogic elitism are well known. It is ironic that they should become the refuge of contemporary libertarianism.

For all the reference to current controversies, Skillen's proposals betray a surprising indifference to their historical context. Why should the 1980s have witnessed a revival of interest in citizenship so intense that it threatens to monopolise the terms of political debate, consigning much of the Left's traditional agenda to the margins, if not oblivion? At one level the answer is obvious enough. The New Right assault on welfare highlighted the precariousness of gains long regarded as inviolable, immune to the vicissitudes of the electoral cycle. The constitutional entrenchment of such rights thus became an appealing prospect, obliging the Conservatives, in a diversionary manoeuvre, to respond in ideological kind with their own version of citizenship. What Skillen (amongst others) seems to have forgotten, however, is the source of the problem to which constitutionalism and 'active citizenship' offer different (although arguably not mutually exclusive) solutions: the fundamental tension inscribed in the post-war settlement between the extension of social rights and the preservation of the economic system which provides their material foundation. Any effective counter to Hurd's *richesse oblige* will have to meet

the challenge of New Right political economy, to which the Active Citizen is little more than an accessory after the fact.

Here, a return to Marshall's celebrated text of 1949, 'Citizenship and Social Class', is instructive. For Marshall, writing in the immediate aftermath of the post-war reforms, the significance of citizenship in the twentieth century lies in the complex interrelations between the development of its various distinct dimensions (civil, political, social) and the system of social classes. Where the equality of citizenship was once the 'architect of legitimate social inequality' (insofar as it supplied capitalism with its juridical and political conditions of existence), it is now increasingly in conflict with it, since certain social rights necessarily impinge upon the prerogatives of private property. Marshall was aware that it would be 'no easy matter' to resolve this conflict. And, while he may have anticipated a time when the 'incentive of public duty' would win out of the 'incentive of personal gain', he never lost sight of the fact that their antagonism was systemic: it 'springs from the very roots of our social order'. To attempt to abolish it legislatively, as Skillen proposes, is to ignore these roots; a speculative substitution of political fiat for political strategy which leaves the real problems untouched.

'In the twentieth century,' Marshall wrote, 'citizenship and the capitalist class system have been at war.' If they are now on the point of being reconciled, it is because the concept of citizenship has been evacuated of its social dimension. It is unlikely to be restored by a reversion to nineteenth, or even eighteenth, century liberalism, or whatever kind.

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