

MODERATES IN OUR MIDST

by A.I.MER

WITH APOLOGIES TO PUNDIT JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

Who are the moderates?

This is a question that is often being asked now a days. As no one seems to be able to solve this riddle to the satisfaction of all and sundry we, in this paper attempt to give an answer to not only the question as to who they are but also what they are. And in giving these answers we shall draw not only on our own observations but also on the observations of experienced politicians in other countries. For it must be remembered that the moderate politician is a specie common to most countries.

WHO THEY ARE?

A few of these moderates are active politicians, able men with a long record of public service. But the majority of them are a vague, amorphous lot of people, who want occasionally to have the sensation of being connected with political activities.

Their chief characteristics are the wasting of time and energy and tempers on unimportant matters. To them the most important things in the fight for human rights, and freedom from racial oppression are Memoranda and deputations. An Enquiry Commission is their supreme joy and the "cure all" remedy.

WHAT THEY ARE.

What they exactly are it is difficult to say, for, they have no firm positive basis of ideas, and though small in numbers differ from one another. They are strong only in negation. They see error everywhere and attempt to avoid it, and hope that in doing so they will find the truth. Truth for them indeed lies between two extremes. By criticising everything they consider extreme, they experience the feeling of being virtuous and moderate and good. This method helps them in avoiding painful and difficult processes of thought and in having to put forward constructive ideas. Capitalism, some of them vaguely feel has not wholly succeeded in Europe, and is in trouble; on the other hand socialism is obviously bad, because it attacks vested interests. Probably some mystic solution will be found in the future, some half-way house, and meanwhile vested interests must be protected. If there was an argument as to whether the earth was flat or round, probably they would condemn both these extreme views and suggest tentatively that it might be square or elliptical.

Over trivial and unimportant matters they grow quite excited, and there is an amazing amount of hooha and shouting. Consciously and sub-consciously they avoid tackling fundamental issues, for such issues require fundamental remedies and the courage of thought and action. The moderates' defeats and victories are of little consequence.

late to no principle. Their leading characteristic

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and the distinguishing feature, if it can be considered so, is thus moderation in everything, good or bad. It is an outlook on life:

"In moderation placing all my glory
While Tories call me Whig and Whigs a Tory."
Alexander Pope

But moderation, however admirable it might be, is not a bright and scintillating virtue. It produces dullness and so our "moderates" have unhappily become a "Dull Brigade" sombre and serious in their looks, dull in their writing and conversation, and lacking in humour.

South Africa, like all other countries is now convulsed by the forces of change, and the moderate outlook is bewildered. The old world is passing, and all the sweet reasonableness of which our moderates are capable does not make any difference; they might as well argue with the hurricane or the flood or the earthquake. Old assumptions fail them, and they dare not seek for new ways of thought and action.

THEIR ILLUSIONS.

Mr. Gerald Heard points out as "most disastrous of illusions, the projection that convinces itself that any failure in ones plans must be due not to a mistake in ones own thinking, but to a deliberate thwarting by some one else".

All of us suffer from this terrible illusion. But we act at least and try to keep in touch with life, and by trial and error sometimes lessen the power of the illusion and stumble along. But the moderates suffer most. For they do not act for fear of acting wrongly, they do not move for fear of falling, they keep away from all healthy contacts with the masses, and sit enchanted and self-hypnotised in their mental cells.

The misfortune of the "moderates" is that they stood by and let things pass when their own people were marching ahead. They feared their own masses, and in their fear they preferred to ally themselves with the Shepstones and the Mitchells. Was it any wonder that they came to be regarded as strangers amongst their own community and life went by and left them standing?

THEIR PART IN THE STRUGGLE

When the Passive Resistance struggle was launched for life, honour and freedom there was no doubt on which side of the barricade our moderates stood. From the other side of the barricade they watched the savage assaults on our defenceless men and women resisters; from the other side of the barricade they gave us good advice, and were full of moral platitudes, laying them on thick like sticky paint.

At every opportunity these "moderates" have been ever ready and willing to compromise and sacrifice the rights of the community. Their Pretoria Agreement, their attempt to remove our case from the UNO Agenda before the last session, and their present support for the Union Government's request for the return of the High Commissioner when the whole Indian community here, as well as in India says that a Round Table Conference must be assured first, are only a few examples.

MODERATION OR INDIFFERENCE?

We are all moderates or extremists in varying degrees, and for various objects. If we care enough for anything we are likely to feel strongly about it, to be extremist about it. Otherwise we can afford a gracious tolerance, a philosophical moderation, which really hides to some extent our indifference. We have known the mildest of moderates to grow very aggressive and extremist when a suggestion was made for the sweeping away of certain vested interests in land. Our moderate friends represent to some extent the prosperous and the well-to-do. They can afford to wait for liberation from economic and colour oppression and need not excite themselves about it. They need not suffer the indignities of colour discrimination on trams, buses and in trains, for they can travel by their handsome limousines and even planes; they need not suffer the indignities of being served like parish dogs at separate counters at public Post Offices and other Government institutions for they can have their work there attended to by their servants. They do not have to suffer the insults and indignities of being turned away from skilled employment because of their colour, for they all happen to enjoy economic prosperity.

But any proposal for radical social change disturbs them greatly and they are no longer moderate or sweetly reasonable about it. This their moderation is really confined to their attitude towards the Government and they nurse the hope that if they are sufficiently respectful and compromising perhaps, as a reward for this behaviour, they might be listened to. Inevitably they have to accept the Government view-point. Blue books become their passionate study, a new Government commission a matter for excitement and speculation.

THEIR PRESENT EXCITEMENT.

At the moment their greatest excitement appears to be not only their new organisation in which they are like Alexander Selkirk, masters of all they survey, but their supreme joy has been their recent visit to the Prime Minister who replied to all their pleadings with the single magic word "The High Commissioner!" And "The High Commissioner," they all repeated in a chorus after Field Marshal Smuts as they walked out of his office. The words are still resounding in their moderate ears and they are unable to hear anything else!

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