HOPE IN OUR WORLD

By PAUL WILDING

'I HAVE OFTEN been asked', Lesslie Newbigin writes in *The other side of 1984*, 'what is the greatest difficulty you faced in moving from India [where he spent the years from 1936–1974] to England? I have always answered: the disappearance of hope.'[1] Hope is not important only to individuals. The disappearance of hope is a social fact of major importance because hope is a vital element in politics. Without it there is an absence of confidence on which a successful assault on social problems depends.

The conventional wisdom is that politics is the art of the possible.

> In half a century of public and professional life, [says Barbara Wootton], I have not found it so. The limits of the possible constantly shift, and those who ignore them are apt to win in the end. Again and again I have had the satisfaction of seeing the laughable idealism of one generation evolve into the accepted commonplace of the next. But it is from the champions of the impossible rather than the slaves of the possible that that evolution draws its creative force.[2]

I take the current shortage of hope and the necessity of hope as self-evident. What I want to do in this short article is to examine whether it is possible in today's world to be both realistic and hopeful. By hope, I mean the belief that things need not be as they are, that they can be different, that we are not the prisoners of the past or the present, that we can make for humankind a different future. In essence hope is a belief in possibilities—not that things *will* be better, but that things *can* be different. ' "There is no alternative" ', says Mark Corner, 'is not religious talk, but the language of secular resignation. Religions inspire with ideals and visions'.[3]

'Hope alone is to be called realistic', Moltman argues, 'because it alone takes seriously the possibilities with which all reality is fraught'.[4] The vital question, of course, is how real those possibilities are. In many areas where we are tempted to abandon hope—and where governments would want us to abandon our

hopes and dreams—the possibilities are very real. If we abandon hope, then those who would have us do so are proved right—and a stagnant sterile present produces an even more stagnant and sterile future. To governments, hope can seem dangerous in the way it raises expectations and gives the impossible a dangerous veneer of possibility. In reality, it is only hope—a belief that the world need not be, and is not intended to be as it is—which will save us from destroying ourselves. Unless we cling to the faith that things can be different, they will stay the same. And paradoxically, if things are going to stay the same, they have got to change.

Hope may look unrealistic in the face of the 'realities' of current problems. What becomes increasingly plain, however, is the inability of supposedly realistic politics to make much impact on the most troubling of contemporary problems. 'Realism' does not seem particularly successful in feeding the hungry, providing work for those who want to work, tackling the urban problems of the world and so on. The issue is not between policies of moderate success and unrealistic policies of vision but between policies and approaches which do not work and a new approach.

What grounds are there for hope in relation to some of the most pressing problems which confront—and affront—us? My answer is 'very good grounds'. Many of the problems are not the inevitable product of some kind of natural order. That is the first belief propagated by governments, conservatives and the media—usually implied rather than stated—which we have to contest. Many of the most troubling problems we face—famine and starvation in the third world, poverty in the developed world, unemployment, increased social division and social disorder, for example—are not the product of mysterious, impenetrable and unalterable 'forces', 'pressures' or 'laws'. They are the product of particular beliefs, attitudes, priorities, policies and inertias adopted by individuals, institutions and governments.

Famine and starvation in the developing nations are not the product of remorseless, natural Malthusian laws. There is plenty of food in the world to feed everyone. The issue is not one of production but one of distribution. The international community could perfectly well establish systems of distribution which ensured that starvation became a thing of the past. I am not saying it would be simple. I am not saying it will happen. My argument is that it *could* be done. The logistical problems are well within our capacity.

Again, high infant mortality rates in developing countries are not part of some benign natural processes working to balance population and food supply. They exist—as Beveridge commented about poverty in Britain in the 1920s and 1930s—because as a society we do not take the trouble to do anything about them. High infant mortality rates exist because the world considers them as less important than propelling men into space or developing the next generation of weaponry whose sole purpose is never to be used. The 'problem' is entirely soluble with a fairly minor redevelopment of the world's resources.

Persuading world leaders of the necessity or advisability of an international exercise on the necessary scale may look impossible. The crucial starting point, however, is to puncture the notion that ills which affront us are inevitable. As long as ills are inevitable, part of the natural order, there is no issue, for nothing can be done. Hope begins from the belief that (almost) all things are possible. A matter such as infant death rates only becomes a political issue when it comes to be seen that things need not be as they are. This is where hope takes us—the belief that things can be different leads to an analysis and exploration of supposedly closed issues. The closed issue is revealed as, in reality, not closed—and a debate begins about what could and should be done. That is where all action starts.

Take the issue of poverty in Britain. Relative poverty has been increasing sharply in recent years. In 1983, nearly three million people were living on incomes below the basic social security level—an increase of 33% since 1979. The numbers living on incomes at or below the basic social security level has increased by almost 50%. A mass of research evidence—some privately funded, some government funded—shows just how meagre and miserable life is for those dependent on social security for any length of time.

The British Government's line has two elements. Firstly, 'People who are living in need', the Prime Minister assured the House of Commons on 22 December 1983, 'are fully and properly provided for'.[5] Secondly, the first priority must be 'to get the economy right'. Till we do so the poor must wait. The assumption underlying government policy is that nothing can be done. In fact, of course, all kinds of things could be done. The tax concessions made to the better-off since 1979 could finance a major assault on poverty. The income tax cuts made in the 1987 Budget—which

will be most beneficial to the better-off—could, for example, finance an extra £4 per week on Child Benefit to help combat recent increases in family poverty. All kinds of things *could* be done about poverty and deprivation. We are not in a situation in which all we can do is wait patiently for the bus of economic growth to turn up. Now is the day when salvation could come to the poor!

Again, take 'the problem' of youth. Young people have always been a problem. The decadence of youth is one of the great continuing and constant themes of social comment from the time of the Greeks onwards. Young people have been particularly hard hit by unemployment. There is much concern about alienation, delinquency, drugs, the loss of work habits and so on. Society wrings its hands—and then washes them of the problem. It seems to be yet one more of those unpleasant things about which nothing can be done except add one's contribution to the general chorus of complaint.

That of course is a contrived nonsense. In the 1987 Budget the British Chancellor of the Exchequer reduced income tax by two pence in the pound. With that money, expenditure on the youth service could have been increased twenty-fold. Of course that would have been absurd. The figures, however, do illustrate the *possibilities*. If as a society we are concerned about the future of young people, one obvious thing we might do is to develop the youth service. For a fraction of the 1987 cuts in income tax we could transform the service and offer young people a wide range of rewarding possibilities. There is much that could be done. Certainly, we do not know what kind of developments in the youth service would be most appropriate. But there is a wide range of possibilities and experiments we could build on. We are not short of ideas—simply of hope that anything can be done.

Another problem, where the state of national mind desired by government is passive acceptance of the present situation as inevitable, is unemployment. In the face of a trebling of unemployment since 1975 to over three million, the British Government says sadly that there is nothing it can do. Economic forces will have their way. The waves of international recession will break on British beaches whatever governments do. We cannot fight them there. If people can be persuaded that unemployment is unavoidable, their complaints become simply unreasonable. Government inaction becomes good husbandry.

A glance at the international situation shows two things very plainly. Firstly, that high rates of unemployment are not universal. Secondly, if not universal, they are not inevitable. Certain countries—for example Austria, Japan, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland—have successfully held unemployment at very low levels. In his fascinating study *Why some peoples are more unemployed than others*[6] Goran Therborn shows why this is so. High rates of unemployment are revealed as the product of particular beliefs, policies and attitudes. Full employment is not an absurd and idealistic dream or the product of fortunate if incomprehensible accident. It remains a realistic possibility if particular policies are adopted and pursued.

My argument has been that in Britain or in the international community we have the resources, the knowledge and the institutions to tackle many of the problems which many people regard as inevitable and insoluble. To take that position with greater confidence we need to be able to answer, or dismiss, the arguments of those who regard such hope as misplaced or unrealistic.

First, it is important to grasp that the destruction of hope in the sense in which I have defined it is in the interests of many who stand to gain from an undisturbed *status quo*. Conservative governments of all political colours survive, partly at least, by stressing the impossibility of abolishing poverty or inequality and by persuading people that their removal is unrealistic because it is at odds with economic and social 'laws'. Such governments need the electorate to accept the sanctified inevitability of existing economic and social arrangements and the impossibility of alternative ways of ordering society. In an unequal society 'There is no alternative' needs to be engraved on every proletarian consciousness if economic and social stability are to be maintained.

The aim of most governments is to narrow hope, to assert the iron laws of economics which demand that dog eats dog and some live in abundance while others at best subsist, to argue that the grain of human nature sanctifies the present, to proclaim the absence of the resources required to help the poor or feed the hungry, to insist that social stability depends on the concentration of power in the hands of those who currently grasp it with such a well-developed and self-rewarding sense of responsibility. Government and the media all proclaim—explicitly and implicitly—the impossibility of realistic alternatives. Natural evolution in economic, social and political life has got us all to where we ought to

be and is governed by iron laws as powerful as those which govern evolution in the natural world.

We need, therefore, to be aware of the continual pressures upon us to narrow our hopes, to be reasonable, to be realistic, to accept the present as embodying all realistic possibilities. Such pressures are a lie.

It is important, too, to see the Church as infected with the same dubious reasonableness, adapting its message to the pressures of the princes of this world, to dominant political ideologies, to economic orthodoxies and the interests of the comfortable classes. Accommodation is the vocation of thinking realistic Christians, the system tells us; accommodation to contemporary orthodoxies and the constraints which follow from them, rather than the confronting of such orthodoxies with the disturbing truths of the gospel.

Those who see no grounds for hope take their stand on three arguments. They argue that people are imperfect, self-regarding and self-interested. If Christians, they talk of sinful and fallen human nature. They see little point in putting any faith in people's altruism, generosity, or concern for the common good because they see these as being in rather short supply. For them the only possible economic system is one fuelled by self-interest. The only social system is one governed by the ancient and proven disciplines of competition and poverty and unemployment for the losers.

The second argument of those who cleave to a politics of imperfection is to stress human ignorance, our limited understanding of economic and social phenomena. We simply, they insist, do not know enough to manage the economy to produce full employment, to know how to abolish poverty, to make troublesome, alienated youth trouble-free and properly integrated. Would that we had such knowledge, but we do not.

Thirdly, those without hope hold firmly to certain beliefs about society—that the economy is governed better by leaving it to impersonal forces, rather than attempting to plan economic development, that competition, individualism, market forces are the principles on which we have no alternative but to rely—and given that we have no alternative we must bear with the results as cheerfully as we may.

These arguments have a superficial appeal but they do not survive even modest investigation. People *are* sinful but people are made in the image of God and they have been redeemed. Human beings *are* fallen *but* they remain creatures of infinite possibilities

and potentialities. To base our thinking and policies simply on human sinfulness is to ignore crucial gospel truths and to deny our true nature.

Again, we know less than we would like to know about economic and social phenomena, but we have accumulated a not negligible store of knowledge. We *do* know unemployment can be reduced. We *do* know how to reduce poverty. We know quite a lot about troublesome youth. We certainly know enough to embark on some pretty well-founded policies validated by experience not just in Britain but in countries which wrestle more successfully with the problems before which we despair.

We know, too, that leaving the economy to market forces is inefficient. Competition may in certain circumstances increase efficiency. It may also produce waste. Stress on individualism may lead to economic development. It can also produce unacceptable social costs. What one generation, or one country, believes to be inalienable economic or social truths seldom survive the passage of time or a little comparative study.

Those who assert a politics of hope may look unrealistic. Those who take an opposing perspective base their position on a range of assumptions which may look 'realistic', but 'realism' is too often a cloak for an unimaginative and comfortable despair. 'There's nothing in the world more comforting than despair', Saunders Lewis, the great campaigner for the Welsh language once wrote, 'Then one can go on to enjoy life'.[7] Christians are committed to a set of beliefs and a way of life which are both fundamentally 'unrealistic'. We are called to a commitment to possible impossibilities. 'Every act of worship', David Sheppard, now Bishop of Liverpool, pointed out some years ago, 'is in a sense a piece of dreaming. We see life through God's eyes'.[8]

The world is indeed beset with problems. That is nothing very new. Through most of history men and women have been troubled about the present and apprehensive about the future. Certainly previous generations lacked, for example, our highly developed skills in destruction and pollution. But they also lacked our wealth, our knowledge, our developed administrative systems and institutions. To maintain hope in the face of the problems which confront us is not easy. To maintain hope in the face of systems and processes designed to narrow and constrain our ideas of what is possible for individuals and society is even more difficult.

We have to hold firmly to two things—the conviction that want, poverty, disease, unemployment, fear, disorder were not meant to be part of creation. That has been the belief of all great radical politicians. In her book *My life with Nye* Jennie Lee quotes a friend's comment on her husband Aneurin Bevan:

> Nye did not believe that the everyday life that surrounded him was the best that could be. On the contrary, he believed it fell far short of what was possible, that it ought to be better, and that it could be made so—here, now in our lifetime, this very day.[9]

That must be the faith of all Christians—that things can be different, that men and women are creatures of infinite possibilities because made in the image of God. But it is not simply a pious hope, a delicious aspiration unrelated to reality. It is certainly based on faith but it is firmly based too on knowledge of what *could* be done.

NOTES

[1] Newbigin, L.: *The other side of 1984* (WCC, Geneva, 1984) p 1.
[2] Wootton, B.: *In a world I never made* (Allen & Unwin, 1967) p 279.
[3] *The Guardian*, 13 May 1985.
[4] Moltmann, J.: *Theology of hope* (SCM, 1967) p 25.
[5] Quoted in J. Mack and S. Lansley, *Poor Britain* (Allen & Unwin, 1985) p vii.
[6] Therborn, G.: *Why some peoples are more unemployed than others* (Verso, 1986).
[7] Griffiths, B.: *Saunders Lewis* (University of Wales, 1979) pp 118–119.
[8] Sheppard, D.: *Built as a city* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1974) p 266.
[9] Lee, J.: *My life with Nye* (Jonathan Cape, 1980) p 265.