

The Need for Public Spirit

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Public spirit can be defined as the active interest in the welfare of one's country or community, but with emphasis on the word *active*. We probably all have an interest in our communities being safe, and we act as good citizens by paying our taxes, working hard on the job, buying unwanted items from school fundraisers, and participating in religious observances. We elect officials to represent us, and as good citizens, we rely on our government to take care of us. However, as human nature dictates, time passes, and we tend either to lapse into a haze of contentedness or to find that we are living in a fog of futility and lose interest in the connections between ourselves and others. Our public spirit lags, and we become static. Under these circumstances, we need to find ways to reinvigorate our public spirit.

In *Imperialism: A study*, John Hobson (1902) observed that it is possible to have a country that could be both capitalistically successful and democratically sound. According to Hobson, the natural elements of an imperialistic government require the people at large to be vigilant and vocal about the policies made by those in powerful positions. He stated that, "The ability of a nation to shake off this dangerous usurpation of power...depends upon the education of a national intelligence and a national will, which shall make democracy a political and economic reality" (Hobson, p.315). In essence, Hobson claimed that the body collective must have a demonstrable public spirit in order to constrain those in power who would strive for private financial gains at the public's expense.

Hobson's view of the need for an intelligent and participating citizenry can be contrasted with Thomas Hobbes' view of a citizenry ruled by power and fear. In his work,

Leviathan, Hobbes (1651) suggested that man (the body collective) does not have the ability to govern himself. He contrasted the effective social existence of creatures like bees and ants with the troubled social life of humans. He reasoned that man's nature includes disabling traits, such as envy, competitiveness, and self-importance, which diminish his capacity for self-control and thereby necessitate external control. One could conclude that Thomas Hobbes would not have subscribed to an active public spirit as he did not attribute to man the art of self-reflection and self-improvement, as does Dr. Chidsey Dickson in the twenty-first century.

Through self-reflection and civic participation this past summer, Dr. Chidsey Dickson (2010) clarified his relationship with patriotism. Although patriotism can mean different things to different people, Dr. Dickson (2010) concluded that being patriotic means routinely doing something to incorporate oneself into a community, something to put oneself in contact with others in a communal effort. In other words, he believes that a citizen cannot be just an observer; instead, it is better to be an active participant on not only a community level but also a global level.

In today's society of bitter political divisions, out-of-context sound-bites, on-going social inequalities, and the lack of time to "do it all," we become over-stimulated to the point that we tune out all the noise, and we become not self-reflective but self-indulgent. Our public spirit is beaten up and beaten down until we feel too worn out to continue to contribute. As Dr. Dickson (2010) said in his lecture, "When you tune into politics...and come away feeling like you've heard enough of those idiots on the other side, a politician's job is safe"; we all lose when we give up on our public spirit.

References

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