

## Chapter 6. INTO POLITICS FOR SOCIAL ACTION

Social activists are usually propelled by their personal Big Jolts into becoming more left-wing, anxious to improve the lot of people who seem unable to help themselves. One way to work for societal change is to become a politician, or at least highly political. In democracies political change works slowly and necessitates compromise, however, so that it does not interest everyone. It can still be effective for those who can tolerate the political process. Here I give examples of people who were jolted into becoming politicians, and those who were jolted in doing political work, usually of a socialist nature.

### Becoming Politicians

**Lenin** (1870-1924) is our first example. His family as he was growing up was a "progressive" one, with the six children all becoming revolutionaries (Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute, 1943, 5,8). His father was a teacher and inspector in the Russian hinterlands where his family could see the "poverty and ignorance, the unhuman slavery and brutal exploitation that prevailed in the rural districts". Lenin was particularly friendly with his eldest brother, Alexander, who was arrested and killed for plotting against the life of the tsar when Lenin was 17. Lenin was devastated by his brother's death, but refused to become a terrorist like him in fighting the autocracy. Instead, he enrolled in law at Kazan University. When he became involved there with revolutionary groups and demonstrations, he was quickly arrested, expelled from university, and deported to a village where he was under constant police surveillance. **This extreme treatment finally persuaded Lenin that there was only one road open to him, that of revolutionary struggle.** His biographer writes, "From that time onwards he devoted his whole life to the struggle against the autocracy and capitalism, to the struggle for the emancipation of the working people from oppression and exploitation."

**Alexandra Kollontai** (1872-1952) was unlike the rest of her wealthy Russian family in that when she was still young she felt strongly about the injustices suffered by their peasants and servants (Kollontai, 1975, 11,12,107). She married her cousin Kollontai, an engineer, and had a son, but her major interest remained reading about social issues in Russia triggered by what she had seen in her youth. This was the period 1893 to 1896, when Marxism was flowering there.

One day **Kollontai visited the infamous Krenholm textile factory which employed 12,000 women and men in terrible working conditions.** This visit decided her future. She wrote "I could not lead a happy, peaceful life when the working population was so terribly enslaved. I simply had to join this movement [of the working class]." She left her husband and son and went to Zurich to study political economy with a professor-- "Therewith began my conscious life on behalf of the revolutionary goals of the working-class movement." She became a writer, propagandist and activist.

Kollontai labored actively for workers from then on. Following the 1917 revolution, she was the sole female member of Lenin's first revolutionary council in Russia. (She was also one of the last important Russians to advocate free love and sex

as a bodily need in the new regime, something that was frowned upon in the Stalin years. She argued that the old morality should be cast off by the new society; she favored, in a biologically startling manner, "the love of worker bees', with life being like a beehive, the woman as queen, her children raised by the hive" [Randolph, 1996, 194].) In 1923 she became ambassador to Norway, the first woman ever to be appointed to this position in a foreign country.

Other people, non-communists, were jolted into becoming politicians because they witnessed direct poverty or poverty-induced working conditions, destitution so extreme that up until then they had not realized such conditions existed. Anthony Ashley Cooper (1801-1885), later to become the **Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury**, was born of rich parents, but sadly neglected as a child (Bready, 1926; Wymer, 1954, 57). His father was a harsh and arrogant man who thought only of politics, while his mother was engrossed in social pleasures. Cooper developed a natural sympathy for the poor, in part because he was raised almost entirely by servants. He decided while he was a boy at Harrow that his life's aim would be devoted to helping the poor. One day when he was 14, he saw a group of drunken workmen carrying a dead man's casket and shouting the chorus of a vulgar song. When the procession tried to turn the corner onto the main street, the men stumbled and fell in a heap, the coffin crashing to the earth. The men quarrelled and cursed while nearby children burst out laughing. Finally the men picked themselves and the cracked casket up to continue toward the paupers' burial ground.

That a Christian should end his life amid such indignities just because he was poor revolted Cooper. **"So deeply did this incident affect him that from the day he first entered Parliament he made a point of investigating every form of hardship that came to his notice"**. He was remarkably successful. Over the years, he helped pass a number of laws that helped the poor and the disadvantaged, including the Mines Act of 1842 which excluded women and young children from underground work, the Lunacy Act of 1845 which considered the insane as persons of unsound mind rather than social outcasts, and the Ten Hours Act of 1847 which shortened the hours of textile mill workers.

**Thomas Holloway** (1800-1883), a contemporary of the Earl, was an enterprising Englishman who made a fortune by selling ointments and pills to the gullible public. The medicines may not have been efficacious, but he created a demand for them by constant advertizing in newspapers-- in 1851 his advertizing costs were L20,000 (= \$100,000). Soon he was earning profits of L100,000 a year.

Once he had accumulated this money, Holloway had to decide how to spend it. One day, he attended a meeting at which Lord Shaftesbury spoke about the desperate plight of people who were insane. He talked about "lunatics" chained to their beds, living on bread and water, or shut up in dark, filthy cells, often neglected and abused. He said that 75 per cent of these people could be cured in their first year of sickness, but only five per cent if they had to wait longer than a year.

Shaftesbury spoke with such conviction that Thomas Holloway's heart was "greatly moved." He decided to fund Holloway Sanatorium near Windsor which would

accommodate at least 400 middle classes patients-- he felt that the lower classes were already well enough provided for in public asylums. This sanatorium, with 40 acres of grounds, was opened in 1885 to widespread acclaim.

Public speaking is an effective way to rouse listeners. Even one person moved to action by an impassioned speech can make a huge difference. If Holloway had not heard Shaftesbury speak, it is unlikely he would have helped the mentally ill.

**Victor Grayson** (1882-1920) was raised in Liverpool by a carpenter and his wife, one of a number of children, so he did not have the advantages of wealth of the young Earl of Shaftesbury. However, he was born 80 years later, so he was able to become a politician despite his more humble roots. Grayson was bright, imaginative, and had a yen to see the world (Groves, 1946, 12). When he was 15, he stowed away on a ship bound for Coquimbo. He and four other stowaways were discovered after a few days and shipped back to England. They were unceremoniously dumped on shore three hundred miles from Liverpool, which they then had to reach by foot. His biographer Reg Groves writes, "He tramped the streets, and the long white dusty roads, tired and hungry; he begged for bread, he slept under haystacks and in ditches. He took shelter in the workhouse casual wards with their cruel and ceaseless tasks of stone-breaking and oakum-picking; **he worked till his hands were torn and bleeding to earn the thin skilly and stale bread.**"

His biographer believes that this period of poverty and misery changed his life forever. Grayson became interested in the well-being of workers and in socialism. Early in this century he became a stalwart of the British Labour Party and a socialist Member of Parliament for a Yorkshire riding. He was then in a position to help put his ideas against poverty into practice.

Two people included here turned toward politics after being jolted by charismatic political speakers. The first, **Steven Langdon** (b1947), grew up in Kitchener, Ontario, the son of a dentist and grandson of a local Tory riding president (Fraser, 1989). He changed his political perspective when Canadian socialist Tommy Douglas, leader of the left-wing Canadian New Democratic Party (NDP), came to his home town to speak in 1962. Langdon was only 15 then, but he dropped in to hear the speech after a baseball game. He recalls, "There was Douglas out in the hall, all by himself, just waiting for the cue. Most politicians in that kind of context would ignore this grubby kid with the baseball glove, but he comes over, introduces himself." Langdon was not only impressed by the man, but by his speech. "It was just a magnificent combination of wit, of vision for the country and its future, and solid hard-hitting points on how life could be better for families. He managed to wrap those things together with such verve and style!" (I attended the same talk that Steven did and also remember Douglas waiting by himself outside the high school auditorium to enter and be introduced. As a zoologist I remember vividly him describing an unfair situation in which a cow with a long neck being fed in one region [such as rural Saskatchewan where Douglas came from] was milked in another [such as rich Ontario]).

Following this experience, Langdon registered as a member of the NDP and became involved in student politics during his university years. Later, he devoted his life

to politics as a member of the federal parliament and a major spokesperson for his party.

The writer **Phyllis Webb** (b1927), also a Canadian, grew up in Victoria, British Columbia (Webb, 1993, 323). She was politicized by the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF and predecessor of the NDP) Opposition Party leader Harold Winch whom she heard speak when her social studies teacher took her school class to the legislature. He gave a brilliant presentation. **He was such a dramatic speaker and person that Webb decided to learn about socialism**, to the surprise of her teachers who weren't at all left wing. When she attended the University of British Columbia, she joined the CCF and the debating club, called the Parliamentary Forum. After she graduated, she ran in the provincial election in a Victoria riding, at 22 the youngest CCF candidate. She has remained a socialist as well as a writer.

### **Political Activism**

Some individuals were jolted by personal trauma or by witnessing terrible conditions of poverty to become social activists, although not actual politicians. Many of these chose communism because of its ideal of improving peoples' lives. Canadian **Norman Bethune** (1889-1939) did not become a politician, but he did become so committed to the communist cause that he devoted the end of his life to it. Bethune led an energetic life both before and after he trained as a doctor and surgeon (Stewart, 1973). For two years when young he worked at a lumber camp in the backwoods of Ontario. Later, he served in the army in Europe in the first World War. As a physician he was active in teaching and in treating patients; although he might administer to poor patients for free, he also charged some rich patients more than they expected.

In 1926, Bethune was struck down by tuberculosis, a disease that kept him hospitalized for long periods and jolted him into changing his life style. His biographer Roderick Stewart writes that "Until he was stricken with tuberculosis he had been under the spell of the Sirens of Fame, Success, and Wealth. **After [his hospitalization] he renounced his quest for wealth and reinterpreted his conception of Fame and Success.**" He was overheard to say that his attitude to life had changed and that he planned "to find something I can do for the human race, something great, and I am going to do it before I die".

When he was cured, he moved to Montreal where he again became immersed in medicine, especially research and teaching. He noted that poor people were more likely than rich to die of tuberculosis so he opened a free clinic for the poor. He tried to reorganize the institution of medicine so that it could offer better health care. In 1936 he travelled to Spain to offer his medical expertise to the Republican cause. Several years later he moved on to China, helping the fight against the Japanese. He died in 1939 of an infection suffered while operating on the broken leg of a Chinese soldier. His work for the Communists of China was so valued that he has become one of the great international heroes of that country.

**James Endicott** (b 1898), like Norman Bethune, devoted himself to the cause of communism because of a jolt to his social conscience. He was born in China, the oldest child of a Methodist missionary and his wife (Endicott, 1980, 124-5,173,221). He too became a missionary, serving in China from 1925 to 1946. When the Endicott family returned to Canada on furlough in 1933, they were astonished to see the wealth there, even though this country was in the depths of the Depression. **He found pockets of poverty, but also an abundance of food compared to the famine conditions in China. He began to think about social planning, and producing goods for human need instead of private profit.** His son writes, "The fact that his jolt towards the left came in Canada and not in China, where conditions were a hundred times worse, suggests that in order to become radicalized politically people must first become convinced, either by intuition or from experience, that a workable, alternative way of organizing human society is within the realm of possibility."

Because of what he saw around him, Endicott began to study socialism. He read Marx, and later preached on social and political questions. Finally, he resigned from his Christian ministry because he felt the church in China was not willing to address human need and exploitation. He continued to work for the Chinese people and later the world peace movement.

Other people were jolted into becoming closely involved with communism by books they read rather than by speakers. **Arthur Koestler** (1905-1983), who grew up in Budapest and Vienna, became a news correspondent in the Near East, then settled in Berlin in 1931 (Koestler, 1949, 23). **He was appalled at the desperate conditions that existed in Germany**-- one-third of potential wage earners were without work, inflation was high, and the Nazis were gaining political strength. The Communists seemed perhaps the best group to improve social conditions and oppose the Nazis. To find out what to do, Koestler began in earnest for the first time to read Marx, Engels and Lenin. He writes, "By the time I had finished with Feuerbach and *State and Revolution*, something had clicked in my brain which shook me like a mental explosion. To say that one had 'seen the light' is a poor description of the mental rapture which only the convert knows (regardless of what faith he has been converted to). The new light seems to pour from all directions across the skull; the whole universe falls into pattern like the stray pieces of a jigsaw puzzle assembled by magic at one stroke. There is now an answer to every question, doubts and conflicts are a matter of the tortured past-- a past already remote, when one had lived in dismal ignorance in the tasteless, colorless world of those who *don't know*." Koestler joined the Communist Party on December 31, 1931, and spent his next years trying to improve conditions of the world through this organization.

**Linda Bellos** (b1951) from England was politically active in the late 1960s; she was the only one of those described here who became a politician largely to combat discrimination against women. (Feminists usually take the more immediate route of protesting and lobbying in their fight for equal rights). She marched to Aldermaston to protest nuclear weapons and campaigned in London against American involvement in Vietnam (Bellos, 1988, 101-2). She wasn't at this time interested in women's groups.

When she explored academic socialist feminist writing, it didn't appeal to her; she found it patronizing toward working-class women such as herself. Later, she attended university, but she experienced it not in a feminist perspective but only as an individual struggling to raise a family as well as study.

**Bellos' mindset changed drastically when she read *Against Our Will* (1975)** by Susan Brownmiller. She notes, "I suddenly made a connection between my experience as a woman and women as a group. It was a revelation, and was my first contact with Radical/ Revolutionary feminism." She went on to become a full-time politician, working through the Labour Party for feminist and lesbian as well as other causes.

**Connie Purdue** (b1914), like Norman Bethune, also had her life changed by tuberculosis, but for a different reason. She grew up in New Zealand with a strong Catholic background and as a young girl contracted the disease which left her with a lame leg (Rowland, 1984, 186). **She realized because of her disability that she could never be like other girls, so she determined to be different**; she was already different physically, so she would be different in her ideas, too. This led her at the age of 16 to become a communist and secretary of the Auckland Branch of the Young Communist League. She continued to be a communist until she tired of its exploitation of women, but she did not stop her efforts to make life better for working class people. She was a trade union official over a 27-year period, as well as for many years an active feminist (although anti-choice on the abortion issue) working for the women's movement.

Little things can make a big difference, as happened to **Shirley Temple**. She had a good reason to be a Democrat in the United States because she had top Democratic friends. However, she became a Republican instead. As Temple grew up in California and became well-known as a child actor, famous people wanted to meet her, including the Roosevelts (Temple, 1988). Mrs Roosevelt visited her in Hollywood when Shirley was a little girl, and later Shirley had an appointment with the President in the White House. Probably if nothing had shaken her up, when she came of age she would have voted as a Democrat because of these contacts. She became a Republican instead, however, when, at age ten, **she saw a Democrat governor shove aside a group of young children who had touched his limousine** (Shirley..., 1988). This didn't matter outwardly for many years. After she retired from making films at the age of 22, she worked for the next 19 years as a mother, wife and volunteer. Then she felt ready for new challenges. She became actively involved in politics, serving first as an ambassador to Ghana, then as a member of the United States delegation to the United Nations, and finally as chief of protocol for the American government.

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