

# In brief

VOLUME 4

NUMBER 3

## RIGHTS FOR ROBOTS

BY

Sir Ernest Benn



THE FOUNDATION FOR  
ECONOMIC EDUCATION, INC.

IRVINGTON-ON-HUDSON, NEW YORK

EDITOR'S NOTE

Sir Ernest Benn, a successful businessman when such was permissible in England, is a noted author and lecturer. He is President of The Society of Individualists.

This speech, prepared for delivery before the American Institute of Electrical Engineers in January 1950, is here reproduced with extensive revisions by the author.

Copyright 1950, by Sir Ernest Benn. Permission to reprint granted without special request.

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

No charge for single copy. Quantity prices on request.

# RIGHTS FOR ROBOTS



I REGRET that I am unable to come in person from Britain to talk directly to you, but I am not prepared to accept the only terms on which my government will allow me to travel.

In the past I have always been able to meet you on more or less equal terms. I could, for instance, at my own expense offer a handful of roses or a box of candies to a charming hostess. Now I can come to you only as a government-created pauper, absolutely barred from securing, of my own right, the dollars or dimes to spend as I myself would like to do. I am not prepared to put myself into this curious and uncomfortable position. Thus my address must be read for me by another.

## SOCIALISM IS A DISEASE

I UNDERSTAND that in the United States there are still those who think that the machinery of government can be used as a substitute for personal responsibility on the part of the governed. This idea, as we know only too well in Britain, is the open road to disaster. It changes persons with responsibilities into robots with rights.

And while you fortunate Americans will last a little longer than the rest of us, your

doom is also assured if you, like us, rely upon politics and collective action to relieve you of the normal and natural responsibilities of healthy men. For socialism is not a system; it is a disease. The "something for nothing" mentality is, in fact, an economic cancer.

In England we have suffered nearly five years of effective socialist government. But that is only the end of the story; we are merely completing 50 years of a sloppy sentimentalism in public affairs of which the present socialism is merely the logical outcome. In the process we have murdered old virtues with new deals. Well-meaning, shallow-thinking, kindly people, aware of the scriptural injunction that "the greatest of these is charity," have failed to notice the distinction between the real article and the giving away of other people's money. So, having lost our faith, we come to the end of the story; we have accepted false hopes and practiced a charity which is nothing of the kind.

#### A DRAB EXISTENCE

YOU will remember that 50 years ago at the end of Victoria's reign, we had achieved in Britain, notwithstanding many shortcomings and blemishes, a high general standard of living. From that proud position we have now descended to the point where American tourists coming to Europe go to the countries con-

quered by Hitler to escape the drab austerity of utopian Britain.

We have had enough experience to know exactly what "security" means: It is a prior government claim upon salaries and wages; it is austerity rations bought with Marshall Aid; it is more and more paper money, and less and less of anything to buy.

This government-guaranteed "security" is steadily reducing output per man in our industries. There are, of course, glorious minority exceptions. But in general, our people have believed the promises of 1945 and have concentrated on their supposed rights and forgotten their responsibilities. Most thinking people among us now realize that while it is easy to make the *rich* poor, it is quite another matter to make the *poor* rich.

#### THE LONG VIEW

**T**HERE is little purpose to be served in wearying you with the details of our life, especially business life, in Britain today. To argue about taxes, pensions, houses, or even ground-nuts is merely to scratch the surface. You will be more interested in the longer view and the lessons to be learned from it.

In the short period of 50 years we have traveled the whole road, starting when government had almost nothing to do with trade, and ending where all trade is under the dead

hand of the state. America, as I understand, is about half-way along this road to disaster.

Among the disasters resulting from governmental planning in the economic field, I put at the top of the list the loss of the market. We have no such thing that counts for much in England today. Exchange by willing buyers and willing sellers has, for practical purposes, disappeared. Governmental buying, fixed prices, subsidies, and purchase taxes have substituted force for willingness. Goodwill is a thing of the past. Price, properly the result of a compromise between the willing buyer and the willing seller, is now replaced by an official abstraction arrived at for political rather than economic reasons. The word "willing" is not to be found in any official vocabulary.

The sanctity of contract is also a thing of the past, and that again shows how far we have departed from the principles upon which civilization was constructed. Governments, here and elsewhere, fail to set much value on their pledged word.

#### THE PRICE MECHANISM

PERHAPS the biggest of all the changes in this connection is the destruction of the price mechanism. Before the politicians usurped the right of the citizen to provide for himself, the price mechanism indicated with speed and

certainty the degree of plenty or of scarcity. It did not require committees of experts and official enquirers to discover changes in production and consumption, and the need for adjusting action accordingly. The price mechanism has been put so completely out of action that we now pay a series of varying prices for the same article at the same time.

### FREEDOM OF CHOICE

THE natural process, named by economists "the law of supply and demand," insures the freedom of choice that is essential to the worthwhile life of free citizens. Socialism tries to put the matter the other way around. Some authority, claiming to know what the people want, issues orders for supply without being able to know the requirements of the buyers or demanders. This theory ignores completely the forces which govern the ordinary actions of the ordinary man. The natural order of things requires that the maker shall produce his goods and display them for the inspection of the buyer who is, at all times, free not to buy. The right to buy or not to buy is vital to economic well-being and, of course, to personal liberty.

It is only now that we are beginning to reap the inevitable fruits of wrong thinking. Millions of our people now look to the government much in the same fashion that their

fathers of Victorian times looked to God. Political authority has taken the place of heavenly guidance.

Herbert Spencer in that wonderful prophecy, "The Man Versus The State," explained in detail what would happen. He foretold with exactitude the present rush of the weaklings for jobs as planners and permittees, telling other people what *not* to do.

You will have noticed that while we are all under the thumb of authority, authority becomes composed of those who, lacking the courage to stand on their own feet and accept their share of personal responsibility, seek the safety of official positions where they escape the consequences of error and failure. Active, energetic, and progressive persons, instead of leading the rest, are allowed to move only by the grace and favor of that section of the population which from its very nature lacks all the qualities needed to produce the desired results. Authority is the power to say *no*, which requires little ability.

#### THE ALL-IMPORTANT ISSUE

**O**N a broad view, the all-important issue in the world today is Individualism versus Collectivism.

The individualist thinks of millions of single human souls, each with a spark of divine genius, and visualizes that genius ap-



plied to the solution of his own problems. His conception is infinitely higher than that of the politician or planner who at best regards these millions as material for social or political experiment or, at worst, cannon fodder.

The individualist believes self-help to be twice blest. For not only does it provide the help required, but it also gives a self-respecting satisfaction in accomplishment which can never attach to help that is received.

#### CHARACTER MUST BE EARNED

WHEN a man is on his own, an individual responsible for himself, he must earn a character — a personal character that is perhaps his first necessity. Others may then learn and imitate his qualities and capabilities. In a planned society he has no need of a character, for no such thing is wanted. No national or universal plan can afford to take the least notice of his personal character.

As an individual responsible for himself, a man must also acquire credit. Others must be convinced that he is credit-worthy; that he can be trusted; that what he undertakes he will perform to the limits of his ability. But when he is planned, nothing so troublesome is in the least necessary.

The individual responsible for himself must try to avoid the loss that results from mistakes. But if he is the planner or the planned, the

loss comes out of the public purse, and he is relieved of personal responsibility. He can then waste and lose just as much as his inherent laziness may dictate.

The individual responsible for himself must strive to do better — better than his previous performance and better than others. But in a planned society, the only upward route available to a person is into the ranks of the planners where he can presume to arrange the affairs of others.

The socialist advances the supposition that the individual can be so trained and managed as to cause his every act to be performed in the interests of society as a whole. The idea of the socialist is to substitute for the enormously constructive natural power of the self-interest of each of us, a manufactured force composed of the theoretical interests of the state. To the individualist this socialist idea is utter nonsense — a view much strengthened by the losses and disasters of the last five years in England alone.

#### HONESTY THE BEST POLICY

**P**ERHAPS, above all, I am an individualist because it makes for honesty. In a society of free men, each acting on his own responsibility, honesty is the best policy. But as we move further from the individualist position into compulsory associations, unions, districts,

counties, nations, and states, we tend to lose touch with that essentially personal quality — honesty. Honesty may be described as a force governing dealings between individuals. When the transactions are between masses, they tend to become less honest; when between nations, there is, indeed, little pretense of honesty about them. That simple circumstance arises not from evil intent but from the very nature of man's conduct.

All this concerns a philosophy; a point of view from which to start. And if only individualism could get these foundations well laid in the minds of the people, we could then proceed with our voluntary social services and other humanitarian plans for the comfort of the less fortunate minority. As it is — without these foundations — charity, good feeling, desire to help, sympathy, and many other virtues have been brushed aside. And in their place there has been set up the mean, unworthy, degrading, and destructive notion of rights for robots, which is mankind under complete government planning.

You happy people in the comparatively cleaner atmosphere of the United States are better able to recognize these greater, all-pervading considerations. And you are in a better position to reverse this mad rush to turn persons into robots by means of the "planned economy" and the "welfare state." May God guide you in your decision.

THE FOUNDATION FOR  
ECONOMIC EDUCATION, INC.

IRVINGTON-ON-HUDSON, NEW YORK



The Foundation is a non-profit research and educational institution. It is responsible to no outside person or group — either in government, business, labor or agriculture. Its sole purpose is a search for truth in economics, political science and related subjects. Further information, including a list of publications, will be sent on request.