

'Bang the Bell, Jack, I'm on the Bus'

By JAMES REID

GLASGOW, Scotland—Alienation is the precise and correctly applied word for describing the major social problem in Britain today. People feel alienated by society. In some intellectual circles it is treated almost as a new phenomenon. It has, however, been with us for years. What I believe is true is that today it is more widespread, more pervasive than ever before. Let me right at the outset define what I mean by alienation. It is the cry of men who feel themselves the victims of blind economic forces beyond their control.

Many may not have rationalized it. May not even understand, may not be able to articulate it. But they feel it. It conditions and colors their social attitudes. Alienation expresses itself in different ways by different people. It is to be found in what our courts, often describe as the criminal anti-social behavior of a section of the community. It is expressed by those young people who want to opt out of society, by dropouts, the so-called maladjusted, those who seek to escape permanently from the reality of society through intoxicants and narcotics. Of course it would be wrong to say it was the sole reason for these things. But it is a much greater factor in all of them than is generally recognized.

Society and its prevailing sense of values leads to another form of alienation. It alienates some from humanity. It partially dehumanizes some people, makes them insensitive, ruthless in their handling of fellow human beings, self-centered and grasping. The irony is that they are often considered normal and well adjusted. It is my sincere contention that anyone who can be totally adjusted to our society is in greater need of psychiatric analysis and treatment than anyone else.

It is easy and tempting to hate such people. However, it is wrong. They are as much products of society and a consequence of that society, human alienation, as the poor dropout. They



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are losers. They have lost essential elements of our common humanity. Man is a social being. Real fulfillment for any person lies in service to his fellow men and women. Any society which, for example, permits over one million people here to be unemployed is far too permissive for my liking. Nor is it moral laxity in the narrow sense that this word is generally employed—although in a sense here we come nearer to the problem. It does involve morali-

ty, ethics and our concept of human values. The challenge we face is that of rooting out anything and everything that distorts and devalues human relations.

There is a widespread, implicit acceptance of the concept, and the term, the rat race. The picture it conjures up is one where we are scurrying around scrambling for position, trampling on others, back-stabbing, all in pursuit of personal success. Even genuinely in-

tended friendly advice can sometimes take the form of someone saying to you, "Listen, you look after Number One." Or as they say in London, "Bang the bell, Jack, I'm on the bus."

Profit is the sole criterion used by the establishment to evaluate economic activity. From the rat race to lame duck. The vocabulary in vogue is a giveaway. It's more reminiscent of a human menagerie than human society. The power structures that have inevitably emerged from this approach threaten and undermine our hard-won democratic rights. The whole process is towards the centralization and concentration of power in fewer and fewer hands. Giant monopoly companies and consortia dominate almost every branch of our economy. The men who wield effective control within these giants exercise a power over their fellow men which is frightening and is a negation of democracy.

If modern technology requires greater and larger productive units, let's make our wealth-producing resources and potential subject to public control and to social accountability. Let's gear our society to social need, not personal greed. Given such creative reorientation of society, there is no doubt in my mind that in a few years we could eradicate in our country the scourge of poverty, the underprivileged, slums and insecurity.

Even this is not enough. To measure social progress purely by material advance is not enough. Our aim must be the enrichment of the whole quality of life. It requires a social and cultural, or if you wish, a spiritual transformation of our country. A necessary part of this must be the restructuring of the institutions of government, and, where necessary, the evolution of additional structures so as to involve the people in the decision-making processes of our society.

James Reid is spokesman for the Upper Clyde shipyard workers, a Communist councillor and rector of Glasgow University, where he gave this talk.