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The concept of the public interest

THE CONCEPT OF
THE PUBLIC INTEREST

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THE CONCEPT OF THE PUBLIC INTEREST

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Society is something which man cannot do without. The health of this society is the interest of all its members. The individual must nurture the whole of society in order to preserve and develop the qualities that give him his humanity and individuality.

The goal of maintaining a good society might well be called the public interest.

Public interest is quite often at odds with business today. We have recognized in part what is the good life while at the same time we have neither the strength nor the

conviction to seek this good life.

To determine the public interest we have only ourselves to do the job. It is a human concept and our result will be a human concept. Public interest will be a compromise between what people think is the ultimate right and what people really want as a result of personally selfish interests.

Publics are not usually coherent enough to allow an ordinary person to ascertain such broad interests as a whole.

Public interest will change with time because social values change. Social living should be a perfect balance between the rights of the people, the duties of the people, and the nature of the people.

Rights are dependent on times and culture. Political philosophies have a great bearing on how these rights may be affected.

Highly organized society (interdependence), implies necessary duties for its continual existence. The nature of a particular culture does not modify the inherent limitations and possibilities of man. We merely recognize that society is composed of all types of people -- intelligent, unintelligent, saints, sinners, etc.

Social living will be guided in large part by a society composed of ordinary people, their hopes, capabilities, and prejudices.

Man has a right as a member of society to contribute

to what society shall be. The public interest recognizes the inherent nature of individuals in the respect that men cannot be made to do things that are not amenable to their nature.

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In a discussion of "interest" some people interpret the word in a literal sense -- things that interest the people (news value).

Public opinion and interest are tangible things insofar as we may discover others' concepts of public interest. We must try to find out what the public really thinks and wants.

The historical perspective also shows us an increasing degree of organization. Trade associations, etc., allow publics to be more vocal. This results in the power of pressure groups, for better or for worse.

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Officials cannot properly set themselves up as sole expounders of the public interest. They can only say what they think public interest is.

The public relations man must simply face the problem and seek for himself a faithful balance of the legitimate forces that are working in the sphere of his particular influence.

In our concept of public relations, the public relations counsel cannot be just an adjunct of management, to be used as a tool for certain expedient ends.

A member of the general public cannot be condemned, though, for seeking goals which satisfy his personal wishes, no more than he can be condemned for being man. But he must compromise his own wishes with those of others in order to retain his place in a necessarily cooperative society.

This points to the fact that the public relations man must know the people, the publics. He must know how to use polling, sociological tools, etc.

CHAPTER V: SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PUBLIC INTEREST

The very nature of the public interest, as we see it, precludes any segment of society, that deals with numbers of people, from ignoring the whole of which it is a part. Social living is nurtured by those within society.

Public interest gives a focal point toward which public relations can move.

INTRODUCTION

THE PUBLIC INTEREST AS A SYMBOL

Anything that stands for or represents something else is a symbol.[1] This being the case, the public interest as it is used today is a symbol. It is a socio-legal one because its concept is found in both the law and in social thinking. The law and social thinking are often one and the same, and it is probably so in many instances where the public interest is concerned. We might view the problem from both the social and legal conceptions so that the picture will become clearer.

It all apparently began in the year 1670 when Sir Mathew Hale, then Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench of England, concluded an essay on the ports of the sea. Hale made three major divisions of the law: the rights and powers of the king, rights of persons, and the rights of things. The rights of things he divided into those that are _juris priviti_ and those that are _juris publici_. Those things that are _juris publici_ "are such as, at least in their own use, are common rivers, common ports, or places for the arrival of ships." As to things that are _juris priviti_, he divides

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1. F. A. Philbrick, _Understanding English_, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947, p. 22.

them into the well-known classification of things personal and things real. His notion of things personal were classified: things in action that arise by express contract and those that arise by implied contract. Under the latter heading he says, "In persons that undertake a common trust, it is implied that they perform it: and otherwise an action on the case lies."[1]

As a social symbol the public interest stands for an ever-changing, mult-defined social state of being. This reference, unlike that within the law, is almost never defined by words, either spoken or written. Instead, it is usually decided in the mind through some sort of rapid intuitive measurement or evaluation, with the only guide being a kind of question as to whether such and such an action would be the best thing for the group to accept. This "best thing" is a referent whose nature is the real nub of our problem, and will be found to be grossly misused, if not misconstrued, in the minds of even the men who are greatly interested in gaining knowledge of the public interest. The public interest, in the first place, is not a "thing" -- it is an abstraction representing a system or relationship among things (including bodies of people). Many people suspect that there is no connection whatsoever between the word - "public interest" - and the referent - the abstraction.[2] Rather, per-

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1. B. P. McAllister, Harvard Law Review, vol. 43, p. 759.

2. Philbrick, Understanding English, p. 25.

haps, the word "public interest" is a symbol for the thoughts in people's minds about what is so abstract as to be not even remotely defined in many cases of law and especially in the general thinking of the public and the people who are devoting their time, supposedly, to the "public interest."

"The abstract words much used in discussion are the words most likely to interest us, and these are more likely than others to have widely varying references. Democracy, for example, is used as a symbol for wholly different ideas. Jefferson used the word in a sense not at all like that understood by Adolph Hitler. Discussions about what democracy is are therefore discussions of the mental processes of the millions of people who use the word and have used it. But those who take part in such discussions are usually unable or unwilling to understand that this is so, and persist in arguing that there is some one thing for which the word democracy is a symbol and that they know what that thing is."[1] I presume that we might draw a parallel between democracy and public interest. Democracy is often a symbol for what is just, free, and of equal opportunity for all. Public interest is often a symbol in this country for what will insure freedom, justice, and equal opportunity for all. There is, too, a certain magic in the phrase "public interest," just as

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1. Ibid., p. 25.

there is in the word "democracy." It is unfortunate that symbols should immediately cause feelings which tend to obscure or discolor what is difficult enough to grasp as an abstraction.

It seems that the public interest, because it is a generality, suffers in definition (because there is nothing inherent which is specific). Perhaps this may be simply because man's values are variable with time and with one another. Whatever the case, we do assume one thing, that there <u>is</u> a public interest.

CHAPTER I

SOCIAL LIVING AS THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Society is something which man cannot do without. It is a society which is becoming more complex with each passing day, and it may serve either morally or psychologically to cause his breakdown, thus denying its own purpose.

The health of this society is the interest of its members, and each has an obligation to his fellow men with whom he dwells socially, to conduct his affairs according to the mores and folkways of the community. He might well have another obligation of an importance which overshadows the first. This obligation, if man would seek to accept its challenge, is that of conducting himself in such a manner as to promote the welfare of the whole, that the evils which are inherent in modern civilization may be corrected and man continue to live in a society which may in turn continue to be amenable to his needs. The individual must nurture the whole of society in order to preserve and develop the qualities that give him his humanity and his individuality.

The goal of maintaining a good society might well be called the public interest.

It is gradually becoming clearer that this public interest is an interest which is usually at odds with the philosophy of business today, and also, naturally, with a

great number of individuals. This is true, I think, because humanity has for years recognized in part what is called the good life, or perhaps the altruistic life, while at the same time, deep within the souls of most individuals, there is neither the strength nor the conviction to seek this good life. The reason for this dichotomy is that it is also part of human mentality to live for the present and the fruits it may bring; yet the requirements of the good life may call for a greater or lesser degree of self-denial of the immediately available fruit. Ironically, the people do want the good life as well as the things inconsistent with it. The result is ambivalence; and wherever there is ambivalence, self-deception can easily follow.

Because it is humanity and not some superbeing that must determine what the public interest is, it must be realized that any compromise which is made -- which is the final conclusion as to what the public interest should be -- will be essentially human in its concept. It will be somewhat like a compromise between what people think is the ultimate right and what people <u>really</u> want because of their selfish interests. To be realistic, how could it be otherwise? If the public interest did not include a compromise between these two things but instead was an ideal as to what people think is the ultimate right or good, there would still be a compromise because the conception of the good changes

with the times and with individuals.

An ideal public interest is too intangible, too vague and indefinite to have any forceful effect or impetus in the average imagination. Moreover, it is impossible for everyone collectively to formulate an ideal except through a laborious process directed by convincing leaders armed with persuasive proof. Christianity, in a way, can be identified with the public interest only as a foundation principle for the conduct of men, and would chiefly apply to personal relations between men. People have attempted to resolve this ambivalence in terms, through a dichotomy of behavior: daily behavior, Sunday behavior, etc. But the individual cannot so divide his life in reality (the life process is a continuity). The result is to compound inner inconsistency and conflict.

The public interest, then, must be a compromise between what people think is right and what they want for themselves. It is perhaps a prostitution of their inherent personal worth that makes it so. For one person with no personal stake in the interest of a particular public, it is of course still difficult to really find out what this compromise should be. Publics are not usually coherent enough in their communications to allow an ordinary person to ascertain their interests as a whole. One of the few personalities to define public interest with the apparent acceptance by a large public

was M. Gandhi. One might suspect that he found the public interest of the Indian masses through saintly intuition, but this is a mental trait that can never be counted upon, naturally, when planning an investigation as to what the public interest is.

Because each generation places its social values on a different plane than the preceeding one, the public interest will of course change with time. Social living must be a perfect balance between the rights of the people, the duties of the people, and the nature of the people.

The rights of the people depend on the times and the culture. Current political philosophies have a great bearing on what these rights will be. Human rights must be satisfied simply because it is our nature to believe that each person is a unique being who can never be without a sense of his own personal worth. This sense tempers his thinking no matter what situation he is in. Perhaps our beloved democratic traditions have evolved because of the importance which we as individuals have placed on our own worths and, since embracing our present political forms, it has given impetus to our feelings about this inherent sovereignty in each of us.

With the increased interrelationships of people within this society, our inherent sense of personal worth has sometimes caused difficulties. It has caused these because interdependence, an integral part of our way of living and

our economic system, has demanded duties of the individual. It has been a strain on the body social because we now have two forces working against each other. On the other hand there is our sense of personal worth, and on the other we have the fact that its full realization may cause repercussions that are far-reaching in their danger.

When people live, as we do, in a highly organized relationship, duty becomes a necessity. Indeed it looms as the one forceful manifestation that regard for the interests of the whole must be met and carried out. There seems to be no answer to the problem that arises when the interests of society go against the rights of the individual, except legislation.

Government provides somewhat of an answer to the problem through a bill of rights.[1] If a society has an interest directly counter to the honest convictions of the individual, and both interests have a valid reason, then the public (society's) interest would not take precedence unless the actual welfare of the larger group would be affected adversely. It can be readily seen that the problems in this connection might preclude any sort of successful compromise.

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1. W. Lippmann, An Inquiry Into The Principles Of The Good Society. Boston: Little Brown and Company, p. 257.

The nature of the people is a definite part of the complexion of social living; in essence it means what we call "human nature." It has nothing to do with the limitations and possibilities of man, morally, physically, and intellectually. Man cannot become superman. He cannot be made to do certain things which he is not cut out to do. Thusly, the public interest is an interest which can be realized only through human effort. It would be useless to attempt to define human nature in even a vague manner. We are not concerned with converting the scoundrels nor praising the good, but we are merely recognizing society as being composed of all types of people -- the intelligent and the unintelligent, the sinners and the saint, the listless and the "go-getter." Perhaps Arnold Toynbee's theory of challenge and response may one day lift humanity into a community of saints, and yet there might come what may be termed a universal backsliding which will make of humanity a community of animals. Whatever the case, it is to be taken into consideration that human nature decrees a limitation upon what society is and will be, even though we accept the possibility that perfection in whatever we set out to do may be approached more closely at some future date. Nevertheless, the nature of the people, because they <u>are people</u> and not machines, animals, or saints, requires us to realize that social living will be guided in large part by a society composed of ordinary people, their

personal hopes, capabilities, and prejudices.

As we examine ourselves as social beings we are struck with the paradox of man's social elasticity -- his wonderfully resourceful methods in adapting himself to all manner of unique and adverse conditions in whatever environment he may be thrust. But we note too, the apparent frailty of mankind, his unpredictable failures in supposedly harmonious situations, the dis-interest, inability, or blindness to the facts of his actual position on the ladder of progress. He may rationalize his situation with as much genius as he could use to extricate himself from the very situation which he rationalizes. Yes, "human nature" has a definite place in the scheme to balance the various social forces in order to harmonize our social living.

The public interest, in being identified with social living, is the interest of the <u>whole</u> of society in achieving a balance of interest in order that people will be able to realize the things which society is supposed to give them. The public interest is also the interest which the individual in society possesses in making his society be, for him, something which is <u>necessary</u> for him but which he could not give himself.

The public interest for the individual in society means several things. It means maintenance of a society, of and for itself, because man needs society in order to be a whole

man. It means that he has a right as a member of society to contribute to what society shall be, and also the right to conduct his own personal affairs in his own interest. It means a duty on the part of the individual toward his group. This duty is one which obliges him to place the interest of the whole before his own, if his interest will weaken the ability of society to perform its function. This public interest recognizes the inherent nature of the individuals, in the respect that man cannot be made to do things that are not amenable to his nature.

It is obvious that the public interest is a compromise with the realities with which man is faced. It cannot be written on paper, nor explained specifically. Perhaps it can be met with planning -- most certainly <u>some</u> planning would help. But it would do no good to introduce large-scale planning if in compromising realities we were suddenly faced with more insidious problems of a psychological nature that crept in unnoticed. Trojan horses have taken the shape of an idea, and they could most certainly assume the guise of organization and administrative planning. However, when we state that the public interest is a compromise with the realities with which man is faced, we can say no more than that it is simply a balancing of the forces that are here to stay, as long as man is what he is and wants the things from life that he does.

CHAPTER II

A DISCUSSION OF SOCIETY

What is it that man strives for? It depends upon his situation. Neanderthal man probably strove to merely exist. He found enemies all about him in the form of animals, perhaps his fellow men, and most certainly in the environment. The environment challenged him at every turn. It bore down upon him and enveloped him unless he utilized what little craft he could muster to modify its influences.

What does modern man believe to be the ultimate goal? He does not often ask but if he should he would say that the goal must consider something greater than himself. Or if he states his goal only in terms of himself he has lost touch with what he is. He is a social animal and therefore part of a whole -- of society. His is still the law of self preservation, but this is the law of preservation of <u>himself in society</u>, and therefore <u>of</u> society. Furthermore the "himself" is what he feels to be himself, namely primarily his psychological selfhood which is a reflection of his state of being in his social relations. Man cannot or will not live in a normal state unless that state be of a social nature. What makes it so? Is it a throwback to primitive ages when man found that he could cope with the elements whenever he joined forces with others? Perhaps, but the facts remain

that man is not what he is today unless he is part of a whole, part of an entity which is society. It would seem, therefore, that it is man's aim above all to maintain this society as a beneficial tangible which gives him more than he can give himself, and which is an entity of startling complexity. It is at once his enemy and his benefactor. When it is amenable with his interest, it is good, but when it is against him it is the most formidable of challenges. Therefore, he must see to it that society as he knows it is preserved at all costs, otherwise it would disintegrate and he would revert to a retrogressive state of existence in which less highly conscious cooperation would result in what we think of as a "barbarian" society.

The strength of a hundred men acting independently is not equal to fifty men who co-ordinate their efforts. This is one of the facts man has learned by living socially. A parallel might be drawn in administration -- a super society of an ideal type. Modern conceptions of administration seem to be something of an ideal society, although a rather unhealthy one according to some ways of thinking. If world society were an administration such as we find in modern business it would be a controlled society, but it would be efficient. How much control would there be? How much freedom would the individual lose? That depends a great deal on the problems of interdependence existing in the particular

society and the achievement of the society in developing non-arbitrary means of coping with these problems.

This law, which we shall call the law of self preservation of man in society is, of course, not the be all and end all. The primitive man whom we spoke of previously, strove to remain alive, and it took his whole mental and physical strength to do so. Supposing that we look at man during that period when he had conquered his environment to the extent that he was able to meet its challenges to mere survival by using a diminishing part of his total effort. The remainder was used in the cultivation of the arts, searching for nutrition of a higher and more abundant kind, and also his time was fruitfully used in thinking about himself and his fellow men. With the enlarged sense of freedom which he began to experience, man was able to conduct his life in a social way, not only as a protective measure against the challenge of his enemies and nature, but by institutionalizing. His family assumed a more rigid structure, he regulated himself by custom, mores, and folkways, so that gradually his relationship with his fellow men began to assume different aspects than it did in the beginning. His striving for self preservation had now become sublimated into a more general concern.

Modern society has reached a position where, generally speaking, it believes that it does not have to exert its

entire efforts in meeting the challenge of nature. The contemporary American may be required to work only forty hours a week in order to maintain himself, his home and his family. Surely his thinking is far different from that of his forebears of thousands of years ago. In one respect, however, it is the same. He still ascribes tremendous worth to his personal self, although some theories picture the idea of human worth as a recent development. In any case, men are willing to die to protect their society. Primitive man of course might not have understood this because he was not as conscious of society. It begins to look as though man has fashioned, by his very nature, something which is greater than, and which transcends, his own worth <u>by himself</u>.

Yet there is still that element of individual liberty which must be retained at all costs, and it is a liberty that has regard for society. Where society exists, there must be duty, a duty on the part of the individual to protect his society and keep it healthy. But if that society should turn upon that individual and harm him in one way or another, that individual would have the right of withdrawing from that society and seeking another more amenable to his ways. Or, too, he may use the various accepted methods of changing that society to his liking, provided a majority of society agrees. It is only if the individual exercises his freedom without regard for what he feels to be his own fundamental nature and

the nature of the whole of life that he does wrong, and on the other hand, it is only when the society exercises its freedom without regard for the individual or another society with which it has relations, that it does wrong. (These views obviously derive from late medieval and modern assumptions as to natural and social rights.)

Whatever the actions of the society and the individuals comprising it, the facts seem to show that this society is a perfect end in itself, provided that it lives in harmony with other societies. Man seems to have reached a social pinnacle -- his social nature is recognized by himself, and there is nothing more to do but to perfect that state. It is difficult to know how much civilization man wants. It depends on the effects of interdependence and on how much such interrelationships will hinder or help.

Let us digress for a moment and define one of the terms which we are using. What is interdependence? This may throw some light on our question. To us interdependence means both an idea and a physical thing. It harks back to our previous statement that it is man's inherent wish to be social. This means that he must be among his kind and that he must be in constant social intercourse with his fellows. By deduction we must say that a hermit is not a normal human being. He forsakes the world to live with his own mind or with God's in a sort of mental duality. He is either a

"beast or a god." The other meaning of interdependence is of a physical nature. We must depend upon our fellow men for the necessities of life. This is quite obvious in any aggregation of people such as a living city. Without our complex interdependence we would soon starve, be unclothed, etc. Now, can this word interdependence be defined using the one or the other? Can we have interdependence of ideas and still be physically independent or vice versa? It is only too obvious that one must suffer without the other. Lately, the interplay of human ideas has most always been to man's material benefit. And in turn it is nearly impossible to conceive of physical interdependence without akin to mental interdependence. Thus, the pinnacle of perfection in physical interdependence would be a society of people who would lose materially if one of its members did not complete his particular task which he was obliged to perform. The pinnacle of social intercourse would be for the natural and auxiliary means of communication to at once make each individual understand his fellow or each public to understand the others with which he would deal. In truth, we would become a universal mind. It might be well to say at this point that appreciable physical proximity is one of the important factors in the existence of a particular society and for civilization.

But we must stray still further in our quest for some semblance of an answer as to the quantity of civilization that man wants. We must probe more deeply this requirement of mental or idea interdependence. Just what sort of a meeting of the minds does man require? To begin, he needs what we call companionship in order to stimulate his thinking, to acquire what we call mental recreation, and to compare his ways with those of others. Further, he must have his interdependence simply because he would feel lonely without it. These peculiarities which I have briefly and most incompletely mentioned seem to point toward something else -- a reason of a slightly different sort. It is spiritual -- a force above physical and emotional needs. This to me is the real reason for man's innate desire for society, which in turn has a direct bearing on civilization. It is innate, and that is that.

And now to get back to our original question. Let us begin by acknowledging the obvious. I mean man's spiritual desires which seem to link him with everyone of his society, and of course his civilization. Without it we preclude his ever being social. As for the need for other human beings with which to have his social intercourse, we note that it is not unnatural for many people to find complete happiness in being with one person. To sever completely one's connection with society or civilization? This does not often happen,

simply because of the population in a given area. There are just too many people. To go the other way and ask how much of this interdependence of spirit and ideas people would wish, poses a question that is not easy to answer. We might consider the fact that our present civilization is one of such interdependence both physical and mental that the average individual is not capable of meeting the minimum requirements of this interdependence. His grasp of present realities is of such a tenuous nature that he is rapidly becoming confused in many cases, and what is worse, he does not realize his own ignorance of the true nature of his situation.

We can easily see what this may lead to. It seems paradoxical that a civilization should become incomprehensible to its own people, and that its growth and complexity should begin to cause the breakdown of those who compose it. Illogically enough, the macrocosm is becoming incompatible with the microcosm. Its material manifestations have invaded the thinking of the individual so that the very spiritual thread running through our associative beings is being snipped at an unjointed by the sheer sensory perceptions of material things.

Could we ask whether this society is logical, i.e., rationally consistent with the premises with which the society proceeds in all its means of interdependence? That is a point which can be argued until doomsday, but I believe that it <u>is</u>

logical, although grossly inefficient. So it seems, after we have looked at this question of the degree of civilization, men need interdependence, which in turn breeds still more of it, and that we cannot muffle men's propensity for invention and construction.

The practical way out appears to point toward the re-education of man in such a way that he may retain something which he cannot possibly do without.

CHAPTER III

SEVERAL ASPECTS OF THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Because the public relations counsel faces the problems of public interest, he quite often must decide whether action in regard to one particular group must be carried out in the public interest in the larger or universal sense, or whether it could be carried out satisfactorily by only regarding the interest of the small segment of society with which he is dealing, such as a group of stockholders, workers, or executives.

First there is the problem of whether the "public" in public interest is always the same. Is it at one time the world public, and at another time only the public in a small town? If we were to say that it is always the same, then we pose the question of whether the actions of the publics of our choice are acting in the public interest in a larger or world sense.

If we say that it must be in a world sense, then the task of deciding its interest, when we deal with sectional elements of the population, can be not only difficult but sometimes impossible. Therefore, we must conclude that action in the public interest, when that public is defined, must be considered in the light of whether its effects will be detrimental to some other public on the periphery of the one

which we have defined. If that action means that the relation between the acted-upon public (directly) and another group within our world, is to be detrimental to some other "public", then the former public must in turn be compromised with the larger sphere which is also affected. Naturally in our age, the interrelationships between groups and individuals are so intricate and far-reaching that they are almost impossible to trace, not only in degree but in effects.

Here we must be a little more practical. The effects of interrelationships probably touch every human being in the civilized world. Obviously the people are not affected noticeably; so that we must say that publics which are measurably affected by actions in the interest of another public must be included in the public which is being acted upon in the first instance. This brings us to the first aspect of the public interest, which may be called a law. In determining what the public shall be, we must first find out the effects of actions outside of the groups first acted upon. This is done through actual measurement and deductive reasoning guided by past experience.

This leads us to a problem directly concerned with the definition of publics. Supposing that a "secondary public" is measurably changed by action on another public. By our above rule it would automatically have to be included in the first public. This point may appear picayune to some of our

self-styled practical thinkers, but here arises the possibility of delayed actions. There might be changes brought about on a secondary public many years hence, possibly hundreds. The answer to that one, it seems, is to pragmatically say that under the present and forseeable circumstances of history, a right deduction might be made as to the results of the action. Act accordingly and include any group of public which might have even a remote influence or connection with the act.

Thus, we see that the public in the phrase public interest is changeable. It does not necessarily have to be world wide. It can be designated public, provided it meets with the rule that we sketched above. We may say further that the publics which a public relations counsellor may deal with could be each defined as a public when speaking of the public interest. Usually, however, the effects are far-reaching, and it would be an unusual case to have, for instance, a group of stockholders designated as the public when we are dealing with the public interest.

In a discussion of "interest" where public interest is concerned, there are several factors which might be taken into consideration. To some people this word "interest" when associated with the term public interest, means merely anything that is of interest to the public. Publicists are apt to interpret the term in this manner (i.e., having "news

value).[1] In a previous chapter public interest has been identified with social living, but one of the few vocal manifestations of where the public interest lies may be found in public opinion. Aristotle once said that it is impossible that the collective wisdom of the people outweighs that of the greatest individual in the making of laws. He was not speaking of public opinion as we speak of it today, but rather he believed that men among the masses supplemented one another in knowledge. It must be recognized how little the wisdom of the masses conforms to public opinion. Of course Aristotle was speaking primarily of lawmaking, and was not concerned so much with the ultimate good, as was Plato. Here, in this discussion of interest in the more superficial sense (as we have treated the basic meaning in another chapter), we should take cognizance of the public interest in things which interest it at the moment. It is usually found through an examination of reading habits of the people, and also through current discussions and actions of the everyday kind. Elaborate methods are rapidly being developed to find what the opinions of groups are on various subjects; this promises to be of great help to the public relations field in the future

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1. John Price Jones, Public Relations, Public Policy And Commercial Publicity. New York: Commercial News Corporation, 1933, 57 pp.

even more so than at present. Even if the public interest is "that great compound of folly, weakness, prejudice, wrong feeling, right feeling, obstinacy, and newspaper paragraphs," as Sir Robert Peel is said to have defined it, nevertheless it contributes to the complexion of social living which is the interest of the public in the more basic sense. What we are really looking for from the public is not public opinion but private opinion. As soon as we can devise ways of learning what the public really thinks, deep within itself, then we will have gone a long way in learning what the public interest is.

As we examine public opinion more closely, we notice several more facets of its form. One is that as time progresses the values placed on social institutions, rights, and values, change with each generation. The trend of social thinking should be always uppermost in the minds of the people who must decide the public interest. A hundred years ago the interest of the public could have been far different than it is today. For instance the idea of the social service state which seems to be permeating our political thinking these days, has gradually become more than an idea in our minds -- in many ways it is a reality. Our conception of the public interest has changed along with it. This does not imply so much that human beings are changing in their natures, but rather the innovations, inventions, changes in demand for physical re-

sources, cause the values of some social agencies to become greater, and the values of others to disappear. Transportation and communications mean a new complexion in interdependencies, which in turn bring pressures in the society which have an outcome in legislation, folkways, and mores. It might be suspected that the basis is mostly values attributed to, and manipulation of, physical things, although the point is certainly debatable.

The historical perspective also gives us insight into another social phenomenon. These days it seems that organization is the key to getting things done. A company which scientifically organizes itself may at once realize a tremendous increase in efficiency and a consequent increase in profits. Many well run businesses, knowing the value of organization within their companies, will seek out other companies with similar interests and products and form trade associations so that they can function better as a group. Publics are becoming organized these days too. Indeed, sometimes it would seem that the public is nothing more than an aggregation of organizations, as many Congressmen realize who are constantly being pressured by "individuals" from the vast public that elected them.

In a way, this phenomenon could serve to make the public interest more tangible. Unions, trade associations, clubs, lobbies, "institutes", and a hundred other kinds of

organizations, each attempt to vocalize their wishes to the public. They draw up constitutions and codes which help society to know what their interests are. Experience has shown that subversive interests can not always be identified by the public, but generally speaking the public interest can be more easily found when organization is affected. Unfortunately this teaming up of like interest usually results in power. Power and efficiency are the reasons for organization. This means that mis-direction of forces by organizations may result in far more damage to the body social than has been heretofore experienced. Today it is not the style to seek personal goals personally. Personal combat is very outdated. Social living can either benefit by group organization or suffer greatly.

We are happy to include the public interest among the most cherished of our generalities these days. This is another aspect of the public interest. Vague as it may seem, the public interest, so called, of our day is an interest which is synonymous with those principles which espouse democracy, even if that interest should cause the loss of some freedom within groups who are part of <u>the</u> public. In a state such as Soviet Russia, where the society does not work for itself but for the good of the state, the public interest would be the state interest, the policy of which is not a balance of the common interest but instead an imposition of

an interest conceived by state leaders. Our conceptions of democracy change too, as has been pointed out previously.

It can be said that the concept of the public interest which is being put forth here, even if it is in the most vague terms, is a concept which could not exist in, or be compatible with, any political climate other than a democratic one.

CHAPTER IV

APPLICATION OF THE PUBLIC INTEREST

What must the attitude of the public relations man be toward this concept of the public interest? How can he take an intangible idea and put it to use as an integral part of his philosophy?

In the true sense, as we have attempted to show, under democracy the public interest is based not upon the welfare of one class but upon a compounding and balancing of many group interests. We assume the possibility of achieving a balancing of forces, social and economic.[1] "Officials cannot properly set themselves up as the sole expounders as to just what constitutes the public interest under the law, nor can any group speak with complete finality. Neither side has exclusive [our italics] right to interpret the public interest, and both may err in identifying their own claims with those of the public."[2]

There can never be a complete agreement as to exactly what a particular public's interest is. Therefore the public relations counsel could never have the supreme satisfaction

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1. E. P. Herring, Public Administration And The Public Interest. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935. Preface.

2. Ibid., p. 28.

of knowing that his interpretations and his actions are the correct ones. Many times people in the public relations profession have been asked what the public interest is. The question must always be interpreted to mean, "What do you believe to be the public interest?" It must be expected that a large percentage of public relations men will embrace the personal interests of their employers. This is natural, usually not desirable, but sometimes very desirable.

No more could be asked of the public relations worker than to have him honestly face the problems that he deals with and seek for himself a faithful balance of the legitimate forces that are working in the sphere of his particular influence.

If it is to be that one counsel is merely an adjunct of management, to be used as a tool for obtaining more profits, a better press, or one of a hundred other aims of a personal nature, then the public interest as we have attempted to conceive it has no place in that counsel's planning. But if the counsel wished to be a true representative of an enlightened profession he must agree to see everything that is to be seen, accept society as a human attempt to make humanity better, to cast out what is universally thought to be wrong, and to weigh his evidence in front of the customer so that there will be no question as to the reasons for his eventual action.

A man cannot be condemned for seeking those goals which satisfy his personal wishes, no more than he can be condemned for being a man, but it would be harmful for him as part of the body social not to compromise those wishes with the higher principles of society that intelligent examination may comprehend.

Practically speaking, the public relations counsel can only begin to ascertain what the public interest is by knowing the public in general and his own publics in particular. Besides having personal contact with a public's members, there are the various media that reflect their thinking, public opinion polling, and many other sociological devices which serve to give a picture of society that begins to ring true. Much of this becomes a mchanical search for facts. After the facts are collected they must be used to make decisions. A way of thinking leads one to make a certain decision. If the counsel were to evolve within his mind some way of thinking such as has been discussed in these pages, it would serve him to weigh his evidence with a higher principle as a foundation. Some aspects of the problem he faces have been presented here on previous pages, but they were collected and discussed only with the purpose of showing the scope of the problems with which one will be concerned.

CHAPTER V

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Without recognizing the public interest for whatever it may be, what will happen? Must we continue to work for the realization of the public interest, or will it be all right to ignore it, forget what we may have learned, and let the course of society run where it may?

In government the need for attempting to formulate an official program in the public interest by a responsible agency arises from the strength of the minority groups in pressing their case by propaganda, and in the inability of the unorganized to formulate opinion.[1] In other words, the government is attempting to weigh social forces and get a satisfactory compromise. Government gives less consideration to a small individual with a loud voice than it does to an important one who cannot speak.

The reason why public relations should recognize the importance of the concept of the public interest cannot be attributed to any particular authority or rule. There are several opinions that might be put forward, however.

The first follows from the concept set forth on these pages. The very nature of the public interest as we see it,

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1. Ibid., p. 383.

precludes any segment of society, that deals with numbers of people, from ignoring the whole of which it is a part. Social living is nurtured by those within society.

As the public, and especially the public relations counsel, recognizes the potency of public relations practices, it becomes more clear that there is a crisis in the field. Either public relations will go on to become a responsible part of our political and economic system, or else it will attach itself to some prevailing trade or medium, feeding upon it symbiotically, and later merging and becoming part of it altogether. Or perhaps public relations will become a nearly mechanical device without a soul, to be used by anybody as an expeditious means toward an immediate end. If it is to become a profession there is no question that the public interest must be recognized by those who practice public relations. The field is concerned with things far too "public" to be a profession without the goals of society being served by it in some manner or other.

By being identified with things democratic, public relations could do no greater service than to promote both in act and spirit the principles under whose aegis it would operate.

Most important of all reasons why public relations should be concerned with the concept of the public interest, lies in the fact that it would give this very public-concerned

business a focal point toward which it could move. Organization without a focal point toward which to move is not complete organization,[1] and to be strong and to become a useful force, public relations must be organized.

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1. P. Sorokin, Reconstruction Of Humanity. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1948, p. XIII.

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