

Lord Shaftesbury – responsibility and the welfare of humanity

Introduction

Thank you for being with us this afternoon and to CCLA for hosting this event. I have often wondered why it is in contemporary political and social debate that we lose historical perspective. Victorian England faced a massive juxtaposition of enterprise and poverty. In the aftermath of the abolition of slavery in 1833 (the slave trade was abolished in 1807, but slavery itself not until just after the death of Wilberforce), the poet Laureate of England, Robert Southey, asked, 'who will take up the cause of our white slave trade.' He was referring to the plight of children in factories and mines. I hope that by introducing you to, Lord Shaftesbury, an aristocrat, a high Tory, a paternalist and a man of Christian faith, we can perhaps learn some lessons for today about the challenges of a free, enterprising and yet compassionate society. I begin with two stories.

On 6th March 1883, the 81 year-old Earl of Shaftesbury rose in the House of Lords. Hansard reports:

'the various Inspectors of general industries who had seen the principle enforced desired to see it applied through the length and breadth of the land.... The principle of the legislation of the last half-century was that of defending the weak against the strong,,,,,If they took a walk through the districts which these people inhabited they would find that seven-tenths of the men and every one of the women would cry out in the name of God to give them this legislation...He hoped their Lordships would give a second reading to this Bill, which, in his conscience, he believed to be demanded alike by the law of God and the welfare of the people.'

What piece of legislation do you think Lord Shaftesbury was referring to? The answer is that he was speaking on the Second Reading of the Payment of Wages in Public Houses (Prohibition) Bill. Today too many of our citizens are held captive by Wonga, or worse. In the late nineteenth-century factory foremen were often part-owners in local public houses. They encouraged arrangements whereby the pay of the workers would be handed over in the public house; usually several hours late with most of the wages already spent. Forty years earlier Shaftesbury had sponsored legislation to ensure that miners were paid on-site in the pay office and not elsewhere; he sought now to extend that principle further.

In 1862 Lord Shaftesbury was made a Knight of the Garter, a personal honour in the gift of Queen Victoria. Ten years later he wrote to a friend 'You know that my title is the Earl of

Shaftesbury, KG, and to the KG, I will in future add a C, so that I shall be Knight of the Garter and of the Costermongers.' The Costermongers was the name given to the close-knit community of barrow boys, flower sellers, purveyors of hot food from potato ovens with whom Shaftesbury was very closely associated. The cost of renting barrows, or potato ovens, was high and kept many of this community in poverty. Shaftesbury became closely involved with Barrow Clubs and Donkey Societies. The idea was simple. If philanthropists and others were willing to invest some initial capital, then costers themselves subscribed a shilling a week to lease a barrow or a donkey and after a year or so, the barrow or the donkey was theirs. Today we call this microfinance or social venture capital.

I have begun with these two stories because the first illustrates the *legislative principle* and the second the *voluntary principle*. In our discussions today about the social contract between public and private sectors in the relief of poverty it is the balance between these two principles which so often lies at the heart of the matter. These principles lead to others such as the relationship of *responsibilities* to *rights*. We will see all of this played out in the life and work of Lord Shaftesbury which, despite his own failings and the complexities of Victorian England, will I hope provide us with much food for thought as we grapple today with these very same issues.

Background

Shaftesbury was born in 1801 and died in 1885. He carried the courtesy title of Lord Ashley until he succeeded to the Earldom in 1851. He became perhaps the premier social reformer in England, responsible for numerous Acts of Parliament to improve the social conditions and welfare of the people, together with a passion for the role of voluntary societies in achieving social change, all driven by an explicit Christian commitment.

Shaftesbury was born on April 28th 1801 into an English aristocratic family with landed estate in Dorset. His family life was difficult and his relationship with his parents less than congenial. He claimed his mother was guilty of dereliction of duty towards the children and of lack of kindness and he remained at loggerheads with his father for most of the latter's life. All of this was in contrast with his own later happy marriage to Emily Cowper, known as Minny, related by her mother's second marriage to Viscount Palmerston, later the Whig Prime Minister. At Harrow Shaftesbury recalled seeing a drunken funeral of a pauper which shocked him and began in him, so he said, the first stirrings of compassion for the poor. After a first in classics at Oxford he entered Parliament in 1826 as a Tory in the pocket borough of Woodstock. He remained in one House or the other for the next 59 years until his death, bar one gap of 18 months. Now

Shaftesbury was an aristocrat. It was the responsibility of the aristocracy to govern; however, with responsibility came duty and the duty of the ruling classes was to care for the people. This paternalism was widely held and sometimes practiced. Shaftesbury, however, commented that the ruling classes were in frequent neglect of their duties.

A considerable influence on Shaftesbury as a boy was the family housekeeper, Maria Millis. Shaftesbury recalled the special care of Maria who was an affectionate and pious woman, teaching the young aristocrat to pray and reading to him from the Bible. Looking back in 1865 this is what he said:

"Anna Maria Millis, the old Housekeeper, to whom, under God,
I owe the first thoughts of Piety and the first actions of Prayer."¹

Shaftesbury had a darker side that struggled with depression, self-doubt and anxiety throughout his life. Florence Nightingale commented that had Shaftesbury not been devoted to the reform of the asylum, he would have been in one. However, he was also a man of great intellect and principle. In 1845 he resigned his safe seat (then Dorset) because he had changed his mind on the issue of protectionism. He lost his re-election bid but less than 2 years later was back in Parliament representing Bath – the only gap in a Parliamentary career lasting from 1826 to 1885. He used the intervening period to tour the factory districts. Many of the factory districts were in fact Tory but he also found himself with some strange bedfellows – once sharing a platform with the founder of trade unionism, Robert Owen. He was repeatedly offered cabinet office throughout his long political life by Prime Ministers of both parties – in 1866 he turned down three great offices of state. He refused high office because it would have required him to surrender his life's Christian work. He considered his commitment to social welfare and the improvement of humanity his calling under God.

Shaftesbury and Parliament

I want now to turn and look at some examples of Shaftesbury's reforming work in Parliament. Shaftesbury made hundreds of speeches to Parliament, both in the House of Commons and later in the House of Lords – I have records of 243 speeches from 1836-1884. He sponsored legislation, promoted bills and reforms and at all times invested his work with his evangelical Christian faith. His speeches covered these areas:

- Factory reform

¹ Shaftesbury Manuscripts.

- Industrial reform and employment
- Public health
- Lunacy reform
- Foreign affairs
- Protestantism and church issues
- Education

Let me give 3 brief examples, mental health, factory reform and climbing boys. Those that care for and seek to provide for the sick in mind rarely receive public accolade. Potentially though Shaftesbury's work in connection with the afflicted in mind – to which he devoted himself longer than any other cause – could rank as his noblest achievement. In February 1828 mental health was the subject of his first major speech to Parliament. From 1829 Shaftesbury acted as the Chairman of the Metropolitan Lunacy Commission, extended in 1845 to cover the whole nation with Shaftesbury as its permanent chairman. He remained so until his death. By the 1830s many counties had built asylums to house the most seriously afflicted of the mentally ill. However, there was no provision for the inspection and monitoring of the asylums and the conditions for the poor patients was wretched in both state and private institutions. As Shaftesbury noted wryly; families sometimes had vested interests in keeping relatives in the asylum, and asylum owners have the same vested interest. The job of the lunacy commissioners was to visit, inspect and licence; visiting without notice, day and night. Shaftesbury was a most active commissioner, his diaries are full of his visits to different institutions, and many of the scenes he witnessed were harrowing, but through his determination and hard work he gradually brought about an improvement in conditions. (cf CQC; Shaftesbury saw people not tick boxes). It was Shaftesbury who introduced the 1845 legislation to establish a permanent lunacy commission. In his speech he used the evidence he had gathered as a Commissioner visiting the asylums, one visit he noted lasting from 11pm to 7am. The Home Secretary at the time, Sir James Graham praised Shaftesbury's commitment.

Now Factory Reform. The industrialisation of England led to significantly increased competition and desire for profit among manufacturers. Hence shift working was introduced and the demand for child labour increased – cheap, available, controllable. Until the Factory Act of 1836 there was no restriction on the hours that children could work. The main proponent of factory legislation was the Tory MP for Leeds, Michael Thomas Sadler, an active evangelical Christian.

When he lost his seat in the 1832 election he approached Shaftesbury to take on the mantle. The Act of 1836 introduced by Shaftesbury brought in a number of reforms and requirements including a restriction on working hours for children under 13 to 9 hours (Shaftesbury had wanted 10 hours for women and children under 18). Employers got round the system by way of 'relays' (two sets of children, one set of beds in the factory, the minimum gap between shifts) and it was not until 1844 that working time restrictions for women and children finally prevailed with a limit on both daily and weekly work in the factory. Shaftesbury was also concerned with a wide-range of industrial reform, needlewomen, print workers and miners – in his speech on the employment of girls in coal mining he said:

'.some of the evils of so hideous a nature, they will not admit of delay – they must be instantly removed – evils that are both disgusting and intolerable – disgusting they would be in a heathen country, and perfectly intolerable they are in one that professes to call itself Christian.'

Modern critics have suggested the concern was only because women were topless down the pit. The reality went much deeper.

Another area of industrial concern was that of chimney sweeps. Prior to mechanisation in the later part of the century, sweeps employed children as young as 5 or 6 to climb the narrow flues to clean them. In fact, the younger, the better. Poor families sold their children into bondage. Many died. Some became stuck in the chimneys, others died from inhalation of fumes or the effects of toxic gases from the hearths and the fires. Shaftesbury introduced legislation to Parliament to ban the employment of children as sweeps in 1840, 1853-56, 1864 and in 1875 when the practice was finally outlawed. He presented evidence of children being stolen and forced into the sweeps' employment, that pins forced into their feet and lighted fires had been used to force the children up the chimneys. The children suffered sores, bruises, deformities and burns. He described the practice as Satanic. The rich he says prefer not to ask how their chimneys are cleaned. The country could never claim to be Christian while such practices continued and the earlier laws continued to be broken. A boy of eight died in Gateshead in 1872, and three years later an older boy in Cambridge. Shaftesbury wrote to the Times, 'It is simply a disgrace to England.' The Times editorial demanded action, the government declined an inquiry and so Shaftesbury moved legislation in the Lords which eventually reached the statute book.

Shaftesbury and the voluntary societies

So we have seen how Shaftesbury was willing to use legislation to achieve social ends. However, he also viewed the role of government as limited, remote and lacking in personal care. Hence his commitment to multifarious local societies and clubs built on the principle of local people, motivated by faith, discharging their responsibility to God working closely with people in need from the local areas they knew well.

The London City Mission

By way of example, let's consider Shaftesbury and the London City Mission. The City Mission was formed on 16th May 1835 on the principle of taking the Christian faith to the urban poor of London primarily through home visitation. The work grew into reaching out to particular employment groups (such as flower girls and cab drivers) and many missionaries were also involved in founding schools. What was the relationship between taking out a message of faith and dealing with social need? The City Missionaries were supposed to be concerned only with faith, but met poverty on a daily basis and were often the only people who could penetrate a London slum containing perhaps 20,000 people living in cramped, damp and dangerous conditions. There was an early row over whether the missionaries should be involved in soup kitchens – one missionary in Bethnal Green commented that 'he dared not to direct her to the Saviour as the bread of life, until he had first saved her from starving, by furnishing her with the bread that perisheth.' The City Missionary was in a unique position to watch for and counteract the rise and progress of evil, whether physical or spiritual.

The use of lay people as missionaries, Shaftesbury said, was essential to gain access to the dens and alleys of London. Not only were these representatives of the mission, 'living agents,' but many of them were drawn from the very ranks of those they were enlisted to serve – essentially the principle of incarnation.

"if you wish to win working men, you must enlist for that service a vast body of the working men themselves."²

Shaftesbury recorded his debt to the City Missionaries:

"My experience of their value dates back over half a century. In all the operations in which I have been engaged, these men were my companions and fellow-labourers, and I derived unbounded assistance from them in the matter of Ragged Schools, Common Lodging-Houses, Special Services, and in every effort for the improvement of Society.....In all difficulties of research, our first resource was to the City

² CPAS, Abstract, 1873

Missionaries, because we knew that their inquiry would be zealous and immediate, and their report ample and trustworthy.”³

Hence, we see that personal relationships, personal responsibility and localism through voluntary societies lay at the heart of this vision. By way of illustration there is the most remarkable story of Lord Ashley, as he then was, encountering some of the hardest criminals of London. Crucial to Ashley’s approach was the combination of self-help, social provision and spiritual salvation. In 1848, Ashley was invited by a London City Missionary called Thomas Jackson to accompany him to a meeting of London’s convicted felons. It must have been a quite extraordinary scene for this English aristocratic gentleman to accompany Jackson into the heart of one of London’s most notorious slums. In fact three meetings were held altogether and a total of 394 convicts attended. Ashley had two aims; to preach the gospel and to assist these individuals in finding a new life. Ashley was a supporter of various schemes of emigration, designed to help those who had perhaps fallen into criminal ways and to enable them to make a new start. Standing next to Jackson, Ashley preached the faith to his hearers and then sought to persuade them to help themselves and to lift themselves out of the quagmire in which they found themselves.

The Ragged Schools

Now let’s turn to the Ragged Schools. The name seems rather quaint and old fashioned. The title ‘ragged’ would be an unlikely choice in the contemporary age. However, this should not distract us from the impact of this movement in Victorian England. Shaftesbury was associated with the ragged school movement for over forty years and it represented one of the main ways in which he expressed his commitment to Christian social welfare on the ground.

In the period up to 1870 there was spasmodic provision of schooling by various charitable societies. Often, due to appearance, general condition and clothing the poorest children were excluded from the charity schools. Many of the early ragged schools came into existence through the offices and efforts of individual City Missionaries. The umbrella body ‘The Ragged School Union’ came into being on 5th July 1844. Lord Ashley became the President. The basic aim was the education of the poor. Naturally this was partially so as to enable them to read the Bible, an essential prerequisite of course to salvation, but the Union also had wider educational and social objectives.

³ Shaftesbury, Introduction to *Our Veterans* by J.M. Weylland, London 1881

Crucial to the purposes of the RSU was the idea of reaching those excluded from the other educational provisions of society. The second annual report referred to the aim of 'removing every ragged, destitute child from our streets, and to the placing of that child in the path of industry and virtue.'⁴ These aims found their outworking in the establishment of schools of industry attached to the ragged schools. Similarly the ragged school movement led directly to the founding of the Shoeblacks Brigade to provide direct employment. At Old Pye Street school in Westminster the RSU financed a tailor and a shoemaker as teachers of their trades – an apprenticeship model.

The extent and influence of the movement upon the poor grew rapidly. The first annual report, in 1845, noted 20 schools, 2,000 children and 200 teachers. The twenty-fourth report, in 1868, reported 257 schools with 31,357 scholars. The various annual reports commented on RSU activities covering industrial classes, Shoe-Black Brigades, Refuges, placing scholars in employment, emigration, mothers' meetings, libraries, Penny Banks, Clothing Funds, meals societies, sanitary associations, libraries, flower shows, rag collecting, Shoe Clubs, Coal Clubs, Provident Clubs, Barrow Clubs and Emily Loan Funds.

A few quick examples. We see here, as mentioned earlier, microfinance in action through Barrow and Donkey Clubs. The Emily Loan Funds were similar. They were established in memory of Shaftesbury's wife, who died in 1872. They were aimed especially at flower sellers who could not operate in winter. The Emily Fund would loan an amount to enable these women to purchase stocks of goods suitable for sale in winter or else the hire of a potato oven. There was a simple repayment scheme and this enabled the poorest of the poor to bridge the gap until the flower or watercress season thus keeping them off the 'poor rates.' We also see banking at work amongst the poor, pertinent today in our debates about Credit Unions and so on. Penny Banks and Provident Societies were effectively savings banks, taking small deposits on a weekly basis. By 1872 the RSU reported 83 banks and nearly 20,000 depositors, rising by 50% over the next few years. The impact of the RSU on the poor and as part of the Christian response to urban poverty and deprivation should not be underestimated.

Ragged Schools were not glamorous. They often met in crowded and inadequate conditions, perhaps a room fifteen feet square accommodating fifty to sixty children and eight to ten teachers, occasionally paid, but mostly volunteers. Ashley's own description of one particular ragged school revealed the extent of the problems. There was an average Sunday evening attendance of 260, aged from five to twenty. This number included, forty-two who had no parents, seven children of convicts, twenty-seven who had been imprisoned, thirty-six had run away from home, nineteen

⁴ RSU, Second Annual Report, 1846, page 35

slept in lodging houses, forty-one lived by begging, twenty-nine never slept on beds and seventeen had no shoes or stockings.⁵

Another area which grew out of the ragged school movement was that of the Shoebblack Brigades, founded in 1851 under Shaftesbury's patronage. The purpose was the combined aims of providing employment and encouraging disciplined lives. The boys' earnings were split three ways. A third was banked for the future, a third went to the mission to cover costs and a third was retained by the boys themselves. One year after foundation there were 36 boys employed and 150,000 pairs of boots and shoes had been cleaned.⁶ By 1856 the number of boys had increased to 108. The Shoebblack Brigades were criticised for providing no long-term employment but Shaftesbury was as much concerned with personal formation, discipline and preparing youngsters for life and work, rather than just cleaning shoes. He always linked such schemes to others, especially emigration proposals (a new life elsewhere) or training ships. Perhaps there was too much of the romantic in Shaftesbury but his aim was to enable those less fortunate than others to be lifted out of the social quagmire they found themselves in. Learning, discipline and thrift would equip them for a better life; a life he always hoped would be dependant in a personal way upon God. For Shaftesbury and others like him, however, the voluntary society was essentially local and relational, neither of which could be said of government interventions.

Motives

The precise motivations which underlay Shaftesbury's work are of course complicated. However, it is impossible to conclude other than that faith was central to his purpose. He believed he was called by God to his work and the bible was central to his purposes. He believed in Christians of all denominations coming together to achieve both spiritual and social good. He believed in the unity of body and soul. This principle led logically to the Christian having as much concern for the physical, social, temporal and material welfare of an individual as for their spiritual well-being, their final destiny, the ultimate status before God. Shaftesbury always sought to hold these elements together in his understanding of mission. He viewed concern for body and soul as equally the work of the gospel. Earthly matters could not be separated from heavenly. The Christian view of the end of time was an unhealthy occupation of too many in the nineteenth century as it is sometimes even today. Shaftesbury was clear in his belief that Christian theology hung together, creation, fall, incarnation, redemption and then ultimately the return of Christ. Of

⁵ Lord Ashley, RSU Second Annual Report, 1846, page 6f

⁶ RSU, Eighth Annual Report, 1852.

the latter, rather than a preoccupation with minute details, his simple question was, when the Lord returns, what will he find you doing?

“The time is coming when matters will not be measured by the talent, or the ability, or by fine clothes, or by power to speak, or by being on platforms, or by listening to those upon platforms; but the time is coming when matters will be measured by those who have the truest faith, the deepest love, and the most sincere acts of obedience to their Lord and Saviour, and most devoted and strong imitation of his blessed example.”⁷

Conclusions

It won't need me to tell you that Shaftesbury was not perfect. He campaigned on some incredibly wonderful and important matters. And he also campaigned on some things that today would make our hair stand on end and leave us bemused at his uncompromising rigidity. But God is rather good at using the flawed. And he used Shaftesbury in an extraordinary way. The extraordinary range of his commitments and interests, ranging from taking legal action as 'a friend' against a factory owner who had injured a young girl by not properly fencing his machinery, through to anti-vivisection, ('on what authority of Scripture...he asked most solemnly, did they rest their right to subject God's creature to such unspeakable sufferings'), his independence of mind, integrity, passion and his public faith all contributed to his impact which we see today both on the statute book and in the numerous voluntary societies and their successors. I think the concluding principles are these:

- A bringing together of the *legislative* and *voluntary* principles
- A belief in *locality*
- Seeing *personal relationships* at the heart of exercising responsibility
- Empowerment and paternalism are not incompatible
- The relief of poverty cannot simply be left to government
- Christian faith motivates many to social welfare

At his funeral at Westminster Abbey, thousands of people lined the streets, holding aloft banners with bible verses, bands playing, representatives of more than 200 voluntary societies and over thousands inside and outside the Abbey singing Charles Wesley's hymn, 'Come, let us join our

⁷ RSU Magazine.

friends above.' What an extraordinary man, whose story deserves to be better known. There is more in the book.