

March 1972

Bill W.'s Twelve Concepts

The Fifth Concept

Throughout our world service structure, a traditional "Right of Appeal" ought to prevail, thus assuring us that minority opinion will be heard and that petitions for the redress of personal grievances will be carefully considered.

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IN THE LIGHT of the principle of the "Right of Appeal," all minorities—whether in our staffs, committees, or corporate boards or among the Trustees—should be *encouraged* to file minority reports whenever they feel a majority to be in considerable error. And when a minority considers an issue to be such a grave one that a mistaken decision could seriously affect AA as a whole, it should then charge itself with the actual *duty* of presenting a minority report to the Conference.

In granting this traditional "Right of Appeal," we recognize that minorities frequently can be right; that even when they are partly or wholly in error, they still perform a most valuable service when, by asserting their "Right of Appeal," they compel a thoroughgoing debate on important issues. The well-heard minority, therefore, is our chief protection against an uninformed, misinformed, hasty, or angry majority.

The traditional "Right of Appeal"

should also permit any person in our service structure, whether paid or unpaid, to petition for the redress of a personal grievance, carrying his complaint, if he so desires, directly to the General Service Board. He or she should be able to do this without prejudice or fear of reprisal. Though in practice this will be a seldom-exercised right, its very existence will always tend to restrain those in authority from unjust uses of their power. Surely, our workers should cheerfully accept the necessary direction and disciplines that go with their jobs, but all of them should nevertheless feel that they need not silently endure unnecessary and unfair personal domination.

Concerning both "Appeal" and "Petition," I am glad to say that in AA's world services these valuable practices and rights have already been put to good use. Therefore, I am committing them to writing only by way of helping to confirm and enlarge their future applications.

The Rights of "Appeal" and "Petition," of course, aim at the total problem of protecting and making the best possible use of minority feeling and opinion. This has always been, and still is, a central problem of all free governments and democratic societies. In Alcoholics Anonymous, individual freedom is of enormous importance. For instance, any alcoholic is a member of AA the moment he says so; we cannot take away his right to belong. Neither can we force our members to believe anything or pay anything. Ours is indeed a large charter of minority privileges and liberties.

When we look at our world services, we find that here we have also gone to great lengths in our trust of minority groups. Under Tradition Two, the *group conscience* is the final authority for AA world service, and it will always remain so respecting all the larger issues that confront us. Nevertheless, the AA groups

have recognized that for world service purposes the "group conscience of AA" *as a totality* has certain limitations. It cannot act directly in many service matters, because it cannot be sufficiently informed about the problems in hand. It is also true that during a time of great disturbance the group conscience is not always the best possible guide because, temporarily, such an upset may prevent it from functioning efficiently or wisely. When, therefore, the group conscience cannot or should not act directly, *who does act for it?*

The second part of Tradition Two provides us with the answer when it describes AA leaders as "trusted servants." These servants must always be in readiness to do for the groups what the groups obviously cannot or should not do for themselves. Consequently, the servants are bound to use their own information and judgment, sometimes to the point of disagreeing with uninformed or biased

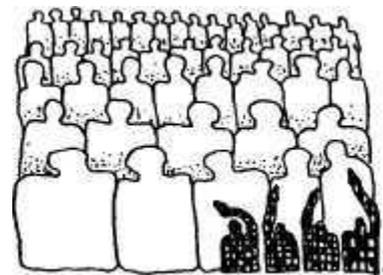
group opinion.

Thus it will be seen that in world service operations AA often trusts a small but truly qualified minority — the hundred-odd members of its General Service Conference— to act as AA's group conscience in most of our service affairs. Like other free societies, we have to trust our servants, knowing that in the unusual event that they should fail their responsibilities, we shall still have ample opportunity to recall and replace them.

The foregoing observations illustrate, in a general way, AA's concern for the freedom and protection of individual members and the whole membership's willingness to trust able and conscientious servants to function in their several capacities, for us all. As the long-time recipients of this kind of trust, I am sure, many of AA's old-timers would like me to record their gratitude along with my own.

By 1951, when the General Service Conference was put into experimental operation, these attitudes of trust already were an essential part of AA life. In drafting the Charter for our Conference, therefore, we naturally infused that document with provisions which would insure protection and respect for minorities. This is exemplified in our "Third Legacy" method of selecting Delegates. Unless the majority candidate can poll a two-thirds vote of his State or Provincial Assembly [now, of his Area Assembly], he must place his name in a hat with one or more of the choices of the Assembly minority. By thus drawing lots, the minority candidates have an equal chance with the majority's choice.

Strictly speaking, a democracy operates on the will of the majority, no matter how slim that majority may be. So when making special concessions to the feelings and the often-demonstrated wisdom of mi-



norities, we occasionally may deny democracy's cherished principle of final decision by a simple majority vote. Nevertheless, we actually have found that our Third Legacy method of electing Delegates has much strengthened the *spirit* of democracy among us. Unity has been cemented; cooperation has been increased; and when the Delegate is finally chosen, no discontented minority can trail in his wake. To increase the actual *spirit of democracy* by special deference to minority opinion is, we think, better than to follow blindly the rule which always insists on an unqualified dominance by a slight majority vote.

Consider another example: Our respect for the minority position, plus a desire for unity and certainty, often prompts AA's General Service Conference to debate at length on important questions of policy, provided there is no need for an immediate or early decision. On many occasions, the Conference has insisted on a continuing discussion even in certain cases when a two-thirds majority easily could have been ob-

tained. Such a traditional voluntary practice is evidence of real prudence and courteous deference to minority views. Unless it has been absolutely unavoidable, the Conference has usually refused to take important decisions on anything less than a two-thirds vote.

This same kind of consideration for the minority position can be found in the Charter provision that no Conference vote can be considered binding on the Trustees of the General Service Board unless it equals two-thirds of a Conference quorum. This gives the Trustees a power of veto in cases where the majority is not great. By reason of this provision the Trustees, if they wish, can insist on further debate and so check any tendency to haste or emotionalism. In practice, the Trustees seldom exercise this option. More often, they go along with a simple majority of the Delegates, especially when prompt action on less critical matters is clearly needed. But the choice is always theirs whether to veto a simple majority or to act with it. Here again is a recognition of the constructive value of a trusted minority.

If to such a generous recognition of minority privileges we now add the traditional Rights of "Appeal" and "Petition," I believe we shall have granted to all minorities, whether of groups or of individuals, the means of discharging their world service duties confidently, harmoniously, and well.

More than a century ago, a young French nobleman named de Tocqueville came to America to look at the new republic. Though many of his friends had lost their lives and fortunes in the French Revolution, de Tocqueville was a worshipful admirer of democracy. His writings on government by the people and for the people are classics, never more carefully studied than at the present time.

Throughout his political speculation, de Tocqueville insisted that the greatest danger to democracy would always be the "tyranny" of apathetic, self-seeking, uninformed, or angry majorities. Only a truly dedicated citizenry, quite willing to protect and conserve minority rights and opinions, could, he thought, guarantee the existence of a free and democratic society. All around us in the world today, we are witnessing the tyranny of majorities and the even worse tyranny of very small minorities invested with absolute power. De Tocqueville would have neither,

and we AAs can heartily agree with him.

We believe that the spirit of democracy in our Fellowship and in our world service structure will always survive, despite the counterforces which will no doubt continue to beat upon us. Fortunately, we are not obligated to maintain a government that enforces conformity by inflicting punishments. We need to maintain only a structure of service that holds aloft our Traditions, forms and executes our policies thereunder, and so steadily carries our message to those who suffer.

Hence we believe that we shall never be subjected to the tyranny of either the majority or the minority, provided we carefully define the relations between them and forthwith tread the path of world service in the spirit of our Twelve Steps, our Twelve Traditions, and our Conference Charter — in which I trust that we shall one day inscribe these traditional Rights of "Appeal" and "Petition."
