NOV 15 1971
NYTimes
C 41

After Rehnquist

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON—The problem now troubling American liberals in the nomination of William H. Rehnquist to the Supreme Court was foreseen years ago by Judge Learned Hand. In his Holmes Lectures at Harvard he said:

"In so far as it is made part of the duties of judges to take sides in political controversies, their known or expected convictions or predilections will, and indeed should, be at least one determinant in their appointment."

Judge Hand was not using the word "political" in its narrow partisan sense. If our judges are to decide controversial national issues in the guise of lawsuits, he was saying, then they will be chosen in part for their ideology.

It is difficult for liberals to deny the premise. They know that for years they cheered the Supreme Court on as it advanced values of which they approved. Now a conservative President wants judges with different values. Is it logical to deny him that power, or even democratic? After all, the Presidential appointing power is the only means of seeing that the Court even distantly reflects the changing outlook of the country—as it must.

From this it follows that a President should be allowed ample ideological scope in choosing a Supreme Court justice. There are limits—a racist would be disqualified—but they are broad. And so, many Senators who entirely disagree with Mr. Rehnquist's right-wing ideas will nevertheless properly vote for his confirmation.

But a more basic issue will remain—the one that really interested Judge Hand. That is the issue of the appropriate limits on the judicial function. Should judges be dealing with heated social and economic controversies? Or should they limit themselves to tamer matters of more traditional law?

In recent years it has gone out of fashion to ask such questions. Mr. Justice Frankfurter's plea for judicial self-restraint seems long ago and far away. Few seem to remember the terrible lesson of the 1920's and 1930's, when self-willed judges almost destroyed the Supreme Court.

Instead we have what could be called the neo-realist view. It was put with candor in 1958, the same year as Judge Hand's lectures, by Prof. Charles L. Black of Yale:

"We are told that we must be very careful not to favor judicial vigor in supporting civil liberties, because if we do we'll be setting a bad precedent. Later on, we may get a bench of [conservative] judges . . . [but] suppose the present Court were to shrink from vigorous judicial action to protect civil liberties. Would that prevent a Court composed of latter-day McReynoldses and Butlers from following their own views?"

Professor Black's rhetorical question expects a negative answer, but it is not so clear that restraint on the part of a liberal Court would have no effect when the pendulum swings. Certainly Brandeis, the greatest intellect who ever sat on the Supreme Court, thought otherwise. Again and again he held back from results that he personally desired because he thought he would encourage other judges to push their views in other cases.

Of course there is no convenient formula to set the limits on the judicial function. Every judge will have his own deep instincts about the values essential to the American system. Brandeis deferred to most legislative judgments, however foolish they appeared, but not when it came to freedom of speech or privacy: He thought they were too fundamental to the whole constitutional scheme.

The justices of the Warren Court did not decide the great cases as they did out of sheer perversity, as some of the sillier critics seem to think; they were carrying out what they perceived to be their duty. If they had changed their minds because they anticipated adverse reaction, they might have been said to lack courage.

The Warren Court is to be criticized not for its motives but, occasionally, for its judgment. It overreached from time to time. For me the outstanding example was the *Miranda* case: A narrow majority, without convincing basis in history or expert consensus, read a particular code of police procedure into the general language of the Constitution.

Judicial intervention on fundamental issues is most clearly justified when there is no other remedy for a situation that threatens the national fabric—when the path of political change is blocked. That was the case with racial segregation and legislative districting; it was not the case with *Miranda*.

Judge Hand would have excluded all such matters from the courts, but that remedy would be too drastic. We have long since come to rely on the Supreme Court as an essential medium of change in our rigid constitutional structure. What we can ask of the judges is modesty, a quality required not only by man's imperfection but by the fragile nature of the judicial institution.

AT HOME ABROAD

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