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Can There Be Societal Trustees in America Today?

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By Howard Gardner

A half century ago, the idea of the American trustee was a familiar one. At that time, one could readily name several individuals who were well known, widely respected and claimed to be disinterested in the sense that they were not strongly identified with a single party or interest group. When the country faced problems, both the elite and ordinary citizens looked to these individuals for guidance- hence, they were often termed “wise men”. Gardner discusses the decline of trustees in American society and describes an empirical investigation of the phenomenon of social trusteeship. Gardner wonders whether there is a contemporary equivalent of past day’s trustees or whether the concept of trustees is one whose time has perhaps come and gone.

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A half century ago, the idea of the American trustee was a familiar one. At that time, one could readily name several individuals who were well-known, widely respected, and considered to be disinterested in the sense that they were not strongly identified with a single party or interest group. When the country faced problems, both the elite and ordinary citizens looked to these individuals for guidance—hence, they were often termed “wise men.” Howard Gardner, the John H. and Elisabeth A. Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, discusses the decline of trustees in American society and describes his empirical investigation of the phenomenon of societal trusteeship. Gardner wonders whether there is a contemporary equivalent of past days’ trustees or, perhaps, if the concept of “trustees” is one whose time has come and gone.

Traditional Trusteeship

In traditional societies, particularly aristocratic ones, certain individuals are imbued with the power to make consequential decisions for the rest of the society. In democratic societies, on the other hand, far more influence is ceded to the broader population. Nonetheless, in European, Asian, and American democratic societies, certain individuals have over the years been invested with considerable advisory or decision-making powers because of their background, expertise, connections, or a combination of such factors.

In the United States today, few if any leading figures embody the combination of features characteristic of a societal trustee. The shift in American society and its leadership over the last half century has been effectively conveyed in three books. In *The Wise Men* (1986), Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas describe six men who formed a policy establishment in the post World War II era. Dean Acheson, Charles Bohlen, Averell Harriman, George Kennan, Robert Lovett, and John McCloy forged a Cold War consensus and were consulted regularly by leaders of both parties. In *The Guardians* (2003), Geoffrey Kabaservice portrays Yale President Kingman Brewster and five close associates who in background and aspiration were very much like the “wise men:” McGeorge Bundy, John Lindsay, Paul Moore, Elliot Richardson, and Cyrus Vance. However, these men were jolted by the domestic and foreign events of the 1960s and 1970s, and generally their careers ended on notes of disappointment and unfilled promise. In *The Paradox of American Democracy* (2000), John Judis documents the turbulent events of the 1960s. The Vietnam War and various revolutions of that decade undermined the authority of the “best and the brightest” so much so that one could argue that trustees were a casualty of the 1960s.

The role of the trustee has been further undermined by subsequent events and trends. Trustees were more likely to emerge when the public received its news from a few major

magazines (such as *Life*) and just three television networks. Nowadays, individuals receive their news from multiple, fragmented sources. Moreover, as linguist Deborah Tannen points out, the media encourage an “argument culture” wherein differences on every issue are magnified and the moderate, reflective voice is inaudible.

Further, as the individuals cited above indicate, American trustees historically were almost entirely white, male, wealthy, and of Anglo-Protestant background. A female, Jewish, or black trustee, or one from a working class background, would have been virtually unthinkable. Thus when previously marginalized groups began to assert their hegemony during the Civil Rights movement and the feminist revolution, and when the judgment of the “best and the brightest” was undermined by the Vietnam War, it was not surprising that trustees lost their traditional role in American society.

The GoodWork Project

My interest in investigating the phenomenon of trustees grew out of the GoodWork Project, which Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, William Damon and I embarked upon in 1995 (see www.goodworkproject.org). We set out to study “good work” in American professional life by posing the following question: How do individuals who desire to do “good work”—work that is at once excellent in quality and socially responsible—succeed or fail at a time when unmodulated market forces are extremely powerful, the search for ever-greater profits is pervasive throughout society, there are few if any comparable controlling forces or counterforces, and our whole sense of time and space is being altered in our technologically-oriented global society?

We have conducted extensive in-depth interviews with more than 1,000 leading professionals across a range of sectors. In these interviews, which have included young workers, active professionals in midlife and veterans, we probe a number of ancillary areas in addition to those directly related to our primary question—including formative influences on our subjects, such as mentors and heroes. We found that most of the older individuals were able to name figures whom they held in high regard. However, subjects below the age of 50 were less frequently able to cite such figures. When they were mentioned, mentors were more likely to be local figures; numerous young subjects lamented the lack of heroes or mentors.

As described in *Making Good* (2004), co-authored by Wendy Fischman, Becca Solomon, Deborah Greenspan and me, young professionals would like to carry out work that is both excellent and ethical. Yet, determined to succeed, many feel that they cannot afford to behave in an ethical manner because so few of their peers do. They say that they will become good workers *after* they have achieved success—a classic sacrifice of means in favor of ends. Both the decline of respected figures and the inclination of young workers to set their own standards are chillingly described by David Callahan in his recent book *The Cheating Culture* (2004). These trends sparked my interest in the phenomenon of societal trusteeship and whether trustees exist in American society today.

Study of Societal Trusteeship

To begin to explore the notion of trustees, Jessica Benjamin and I conducted a pilot study in summer 2004. Our study has shed some light on how contemporary citizens view trusteeship. We interviewed 45 people, split nearly evenly into two groups: community leaders and average citizens. The community leaders were interviewed either in-person or by phone. In the aggregate, the leaders had a high degree of education, were well-off, and had contributed to the community in a significant way. Their mean age was 58. The average citizens were approached and interviewed at various shopping malls throughout the suburbs of Philadelphia. Their mean age was 55. About 60 percent of the subjects approached in each group agreed to participate in the study.

For both groups we began with a brief explanation of the study and a brief definition of trusteeship, then asked the same four questions. The questions, asked in this order, were: 1) Do you feel that there has been a decline in trusteeship in America over the past half century? 2) If so, is this a positive or negative situation for America? 3) Who, if any, might be some modern-day trustees of America and why? 4) If one were to resurrect the role of trustee, how might it best be fostered in the America of the early 21st century? Do you believe that this is desirable or even possible? Interviewees were encouraged to elaborate on any or all questions.

Five sets of findings emerged from the study:

1. Common themes and explanations across groups. There was surprisingly little variation between the leader and average citizen groups; differences that emerged were, for the most part, expected. There was an overwhelming consensus that trusteeship had in fact declined over the past half-century, and the reasons offered were similar.

Most subjects felt that America is more fragmented today as a result of immigration, assimilation, and greater mobility; this fragmentation may catalyze polarized public sentiments. As society becomes more complex and differentiated, it is increasingly difficult for a single individual to know enough to make judicious recommendations on a range of issues. At the time of the Cold War, for example, it was possible to think in terms of a bipolar world; such expertise is less likely to be adequate in a multi-polar world. Similarly, as the Federal government grows in size and is involved in hundreds of domains, it is more difficult for individuals to possess expertise across the domestic front. The sheer speed of change and the deluge of information also undermine a common knowledge base and a collective will.

Both the community leaders and the average citizen groups felt that the media bore significant responsibility for the decline in trusteeship. Subjects cited media scrutiny as working to discourage quality people from running for office due to fear of irreparable damage to their reputations. Further, the infiltration of the media into every aspect of life, coupled with unrelenting muckraking, has also bred distrust and dissent amongst the

public. This situation stimulates desire for self-reliance and independence of thought; for better or worse, the individual becomes his or her own best “wise man.”

2. Choice of trustees. When pushed to name trustees, members of the groups gave generally similar responses. Within both groups journalists came first (e.g, Tom Brokaw, Thomas Friedman), followed by politicians (Jimmy Carter, Ralph Nader, John McCain), and then a mix of business (Bill Gates), media (Oprah Winfrey), and religious figures (Pope John Paul II).

There were some differences. Within professions, the average citizens were more likely to mention well-known television personalities and more local news media. The community leaders were more fluent in their abilities to name organizations and foundations (e.g., government agencies such as the FDA, nongovernmental agencies such as Brookings Institution). They were also more likely to suggest practical solutions to the problem of declining trusteeship including, for example, promotion and encouragement of good works, creation of more nonprofit organizations, and (somehow) reform of the media.

3. Contrasting views of the decline. One perhaps more surprising difference between the two groups was the fact that the community leaders regretted the loss or lack of trusteeship more so than did the average citizens. The average citizens were more likely to discern positives in the lack of traditional trustees of influence and the advantages of increasingly diverse sources of information and democratic institutions. The contrasting sentiment may be due to the community leaders’ greater knowledge of past events and deeper understanding of the detrimental effects of a lack of trusteeship. However, community leaders may also be lamenting their own loss of power.

4. Shifts in the nature of trustees. Both groups identified three major shifts that have occurred in the past half century: from national trustees to local trustees, from universal trustees to specialized trustees, from educated trustees to celebrity trustees. Provoked by debacles such as Watergate and the Vietnam War, respondents ceased to trust national political figures; instead they sought more familiar and trustworthy (hence, local) trustees. Additionally, we now live in a celebrity culture. The best known individuals are not political figures like Dean Acheson or educators like Kingman Brewster. Rather, entertainers, athletes, and individuals “famous for being famous” populate mass circulation magazines and the airwaves.

5. Nostalgia for traditional values. There was nostalgia amongst both groups for “simpler times” – even if these times are in part mythical – especially on the part of the older subjects. Traditional values were seen to be eroding. “Values” seemed to refer both to a familial component (the traditional nuclear family) and an ethical component (greater sense of integrity and helpfulness). Some blamed the media for undermining these values, while others acknowledged that the media simply reveal things today that would have been censored a half-century ago.

Conclusion

The loss of trustees does not matter in times of peace and prosperity—perhaps that is why their absence was not lamented in the later 1980s and 1990s. But with a disputed election in 2000, the Supreme Court, then the most trusted group in the country, stepped in and voted along strict partisan lines. The Court's trusteeship suffered a temporary, if not permanent, scar. With the events of 9/11, the rise of fundamentalism around the world, the mixed blessings of globalization, and continuing debates about hot button issues such as abortion and stem cell research, however, the need for trustees who are informed—as well as charismatic—becomes acute. The waning of trustees of the old sort may have been justified, but our society cannot replace something with nothing.

It may be possible that trustees can be trained and developed. Higher education's leaders can play a role in fostering trusteeship through decisions they make with regard to who is invited to speak on campus, who is honored by the university, and whose lives and what issues are studied in the curriculum. I find it significant that a number of colleges assigned as summer reading *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, a biography of the remarkable physician Paul Farmer. Are colleges and universities actively engaged in the continuing education of today's leaders, helping them to grow into the role and achieve the stature of trustees? An ultimate goal for this project is to identify the most promising approaches to trusteeship for today and tomorrow and to help construct institutions and career paths that lead to a society that is well-guided and functions productively.

I am convinced that American society needs trustees. It is equally clear, though, that trustees of the 21st century cannot simply replicate those of the 20th century; they will have to represent different groups and they may in fact need to function as groups, such as commissions, rather than as individuals. But in the absence of such true citizens, we are destined to have a nation riven by factions that no longer listen to one another.