

THE CENTENARY OF JOHN STUART MILL'S

Representative Government

IT IS a hundred years since John Stuart Mill published his long-meditated *Considerations on Representative Government*, a standard work of which it can be said, as it was said of *Progress and Poverty*, that it described "history in advance". As Mill's findings are as unflattering to the political as George's to the economic publicists of today the centenary is not likely to be widely noticed. But we have seen so many democracies surrender to various types of dictatorship that it is instructive to re-examine the work of an eminent and independent thinker, written before democracy became a superstition.

By 1861 it was obvious that "the interests concerned" could not further delay an extension of the franchise. Liberal opinion, though favourable, was cautious. Faith in personal freedom had been confirmed, as never before, by the economic revolution of Free Trade and the course of political revolutions abroad did not suggest that universal, indiscriminate franchise was a safeguard for the liberty which really mattered. A measure of economic justice had proved more effective than any political arrangement.

Mill observes that the best form of government is that which promotes the highest development of character and intelligence in the people, and participation in the decisions and functions of government itself is a necessary element in this development. In the Greek states where every freeman had a voice in the general assembly, so that high public office was open only to character and talent, the general level of human qualities had been raised to the highest degree recorded. Under modern conditions this stimulating atmosphere of active and responsible discussion could be reproduced only through representatives. Therefore representative government was best, the only method capable of checking the "uniformity of mediocrity" to which modern societies inclined. But, as the masses lacked both the mental practice and the wider sympathies required the problem was to establish guarantees so that the influence of an enlightened and public spirited minority could not be suppressed by those who would exploit the ignorance of the uninstructed. Mill foresaw that the masses might easily be deluded into a return to Protectionism and its attendant fallacies leading to the superstition of the miracle-working state. They might develop such a passion for governing others as to sacrifice their personal independence for the illusion of participating in a despotism. But the Englishman (1861) had no such passion. Although selfishness was the general tone in all societies if, in a democracy, every elector retained an equal right to speak through representatives freely chosen, the voice of reason and public spirit might hold

the balance between conflicting selfish groups. In modern representative bodies the tyranny of the majority had hitherto checked or prevented such a balance from operating.

Hitherto, Mill pointed out, modern history had provided examples only of false not of true democracy. All electors had not been allowed equal representation. Everywhere majorities had secured all representation, to the disfranchisement of minorities. This was especially noticeable in America the pioneer of the single-member constituency system which had provided the basis for the sinister "caucus" or party machine rendering electors almost powerless. England (in 1861) with its traditional two-member system was comparatively exempt but the danger would grow. Formal extension of the franchise together with real curtailment of its value would defeat the whole object of democracy, the stimulation of a spirit of active and enlightened citizenship. It was imperative that any extension of the franchise should be accompanied by an electoral reform by which all voters had an equal and free opportunity of electing members on their individual merits to the central government. The principle of the single transferable vote system — which Mill referred to as Personal Representation — was the reform needed.

In local government bodies this was equally imperative. Local government afforded a more continuous opportunity for the exercise of citizenship than voting at general elections; but local cliques dominated affairs and the level of candidates was not high. If every borough and county were a single constituency independent men of a higher type and wider reputation would be attracted. In local affairs, however, the franchise should be limited to ratepayers and those in receipt of public funds should be excluded. Local government could be independent only if self-supporting. It could not remain so if dominated by voters whose interest was only to obtain money or other value from public sources.

How far British democracy has failed to achieve the ideal may be gauged from considering the previous sentence. If today all electors receiving State assistance either directly or indirectly were removed from the list the franchise would be more restricted than ever in history. But if State assistance of all kinds were immediately withdrawn the widespread destitution, among all but the beneficiaries from private rent, would be so intense that revolution would certainly ensue.

As all Mill's warnings — some not included in this brief summary — have been ignored he cannot on the political plane be proved mistaken. But he failed

to see that for the mass of men economic independence counts for more than political independence and the former must accompany the latter if true democracy is to have a fair trial. So long as land is a monopoly its owners will always retain sufficient power to corrupt government — indeed democracy offers them an easier opportunity than in an oligarchy such as England in 1861. This power is insidious rather than apparent but the course of events gives sufficient evidence of its use.

Mill, to his surprise, was elected to the Parliament which passed the Household Suffrage Act of 1866. He succeeded in establishing the "Three Corner" constituencies, a slight measure of electoral reform; this despite the objections of Disraeli who sponsored the Act. It is significant that Disraeli should have been in favour of extending the franchise but opposed to extending the voter's freedom of choice. Disraeli's ideal — which one may read in his books — was a society where all other classes accepted the paternal guidance of beneficent landlords to whom all political decision were to be referred. Superficially, extensions of the franchise would appear to conflict with this ideal. But Disraeli, to judge from the policies he followed, believed that by political management the lower orders might be lulled into political apathy, or their attention diverted to innocuous courses, more easily than the (then) hard-headed and independent middle classes, who insisted on financial economy. He proved that this could be accomplished by political strategy, by "social reform" at taxpayers' expense, by extending the State's guiding hand, and by an overseas policy which distracted the citizen's attention from radical reform at home.

Disraeli's successors continued this method of extending the franchise and nullifying the power of the electorate. In 1884 when the Liberal government proposed Manhood Suffrage the House of Lords insisted on a Redistribution Act which abolished the two-member and three-cornered constituencies, thus paving the way for the domination of party machines depending upon the power of money. And "the mother of all monopolies", in addition to subtle political pressure in a multitude of indirect ways, has always most money to spare for party organisation. The Act of 1884, so far from benefiting liberal influence, excluded the Liberal Party from power for almost twenty years. History might have been different if fundamental economic democracy had accompanied political democracy. Experience shows that a clear and radical economic reform can dissipate political apathy. In 1905, when the land question was brought predominantly before the electorate, political interest was aroused to an astonishing degree and despite all handicaps the Liberal Party won the largest majority in its history.

Today when the land scandal is too obvious to be ignored, and the utter futility of the squabbles of the Six and the Seven reveals the stupidity of Protectionism, the puzzle is why the Liberal Party refuses to learn from its own history.

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The Law Of Amortisation

By ERLING LIE

FROM earliest times human life has been sustained by labour wringing from Nature whatever was considered necessary to satisfy human needs. As circumstances have changed, the concept of "needs" has changed increasing as man's domination of the earth has developed.

At all stages of development what may be called the "Law of Amortisation" is readily discernible even by those who know little of the economic science which lately has been made so difficult and unintelligible. This law may be formulated as follows:

All materials produce created by human activity is doomed to perish.

Crops are harvested and soon consumed. Houses and other buildings last longer, but must be repaired and kept in order. Tools and machinery soon become obsolete. Our imposing mercantile marine has to be renewed after about 30 years, and the aviation fleet has a much shorter life. Unless it is constantly cultivated, the soil soon reverts to wilderness. Even the rarest and most durable things of art and jewelry are amortised by the costliness of guarding them. And, besides consumption and wear, the results of human labour are destroyed by earthquakes, floods, fire, war and other catastrophes.

The amazing technical developments of modern times have revolutionised living conditions, making it possible for the masses to enjoy luxuries which in earlier times were reserved for the "rich". Now it is a question not only of producing to meet existing needs but also of creating new ones, so as to dispose of the ever-increasing production for unless consumption keeps pace economic crises and catastrophes will result. These facts, not the pressure of organised labour, have led to higher wages and possibilities for workers. Yet it is a fact that although wages have risen and living conditions have improved labour does not get a proportionally greater share of the produced wealth than when wages and living conditions were on a lower level. This applies to all kinds of labour.

While mankind has been struggling to produce wealth, fighting over its division, and consuming it, Nature has been at hand as from genesis. She is the basic inheritance of us all and, unlike all man-made things, will not perish until Doomsday. How has mankind disposed of her? Through history there have been many forms but here it is possible to consider only the situation in the modern societies of the western world.

We find that Nature is treated as a commodity like other commodities, except that it does not need to be amortised. Its price is constantly rising and consequently it affords the best security for mortgages. Thus Nature creates "capital" quite different in character from that created by man, which must be constantly reproduced.