

REFORMING PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY

E. P. MIDDLETON reviews A. E. Mander's new book 'OUR SHAM DEMOCRACY'* and finds it bristling with new and novel ideas for the attainment of the ideal machinery of government.

- A society in which the governing body (parliament) is freely chosen by majority-vote in secret ballot, and is subject to re-election at intervals of not more than two or three years.
- The executive government (the ministry) must be directly responsible to parliament, from which it derives its authority and to which it is entirely subject.
- The franchise must be the right of every citizen who possesses such personal qualifications as are regarded as normal among the people of that country at that time. (But this does not imply that every person who is entitled to vote must be compelled to do so.)
- Reliable news and other factual information on all subjects of public concern must be readily available to the public. Such information must never be suppressed, distorted, over-emphasised, played down, slanted, or mixed with comment — to suit government, or to suit any political party, or any financial, commercial, industrial, religious, or other sectional interest in the community.
- On every public question with political significance, both sides (regardless of their ability to pay for it) must enjoy equal opportunities of putting their case before the public.
- Every citizen must enjoy a right to express his opinion, and the grounds for such opinion, on any subject whatsoever.
- Every group or section of the people, and likewise the representatives of any commercial, industrial, professional, labour, or other sectional interest or concern, must have the right to state a case or make a request — publicly but not privately or secretly — to the government.
- All proceedings of parliament must be public. And parliamentary procedures must be such as to encourage members — after hearing the facts and arguments on both sides fairly presented and discussed — to vote each according to his own personal judgment.
- Parliament must be the supreme authority in the nation. Its decision must be final and not subject to being overruled by any court-of-law, or by any other institution, or by any person or section of the community.
- All information available to the government on any subject (except only information which could be useful to a foreign enemy in case of war, and information concerning the private life of a citizen) must be available to parliament.
- Finally it is essential that a substantial proportion of the electors shall be educated, actively interested in matters of public importance, and imbued with a sense of real and significant participation in the nation's political life.

Having given the foregoing eleven points as his composite definition of a true political democracy, Mr. Mander devotes the rest of his admirable little book to showing how much the typical western-style parliamentary democracy departs from his conception of the ideal.

MYTHS AND CLICHES

In the process, he does a very creditable job of exposing the faults in the pillars of our society and proffers some ingenious ideas for bringing it more into line with that ideal. In the process, also, he throws some clear light on old myths and cliches, as in, for instance his chapters on 'equity' and 'rights'. And his discussion of the theory of 'majority rule' and of the rights of minorities is as refreshing as it is on target ('It can scarcely be contended that a mere aggregation of numbers represents an aggregation of wisdom, of knowledge, of intelligence or of concern for the public welfare'). Indeed, he has some interesting points to make on the notorious lack of tolerance of the (in the well-publicised Nixon cliché) 'Great Silent Majority'; and he is caustic, as well as commonsensical, about 'public opinion', or, as he prefers to call it, 'public sentiment'.

On the subject of the parliamentary representative, Mr. Mander considers such questions as personal qualities ('The Right Man'), election campaigns ('television charisma') and the use of 'scene' publicity. While, in discussing types of government alternative to democracy, he shows how circumstances must govern the choice, and he accepts the pragmatism behind the one-party government idea in countries still bound to, or only emerging from, a tradition of tribalism. On the other hand, in observing what he describes as "our present form of partial political democracy, of democracy mixed with other elements which largely nullify it", we recognise, he says, all its crudities, its absurdities, its vulgarities, and its means of securing good government. "Yet it does possess," he goes on "characteristics which, over the long run, provide the best available safeguard against stagnation, corruption, oppression, and above all against the permanent entrenchment in power of a privileged group or class caring only for its own interests."

ABOLITION OF COMPULSORY VOTING

When it comes to suggested reforms to bring our 'sham democracies' nearer to the ideal, the author has some novel and interesting proposals to offer. First on

the list, it is good to note, is the abolition of compulsory enrolment and compulsory voting, one effect of which, as he points out, would be to drastically reduce the costly and wasteful spate of elector-seeking publicity and to alter the nature of its appeal from concern for the lowest common denominator to that of the intelligent voter (he would also abolish 'how to vote' cards). Next he would deny political parties the right to determine (pre-selection) who the candidate is to be for a given electorate. And the way in which he would do this comprises his most novel suggestion, described in his chapter 16 'A New System of Voting'.

This is based on the concept of the traditional parliamentary system common to such countries as Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, comprising a House divided on the basis of Government and Opposition sides. With the difference, however, that either side of the House could consist of the representatives of any number of parties reflecting electoral opinion but united on the single principle of support for or opposition to the existing government. All such representatives would vote freely on all issues before them, unshackled by party discipline, bound only by their essential support for or opposition to the government on actual votes of confidence, defeat in which would be the sole justification for the government's resignation. To elect such a parliament, Mr. Mander proposes a new, simplified ballot paper.

NEW BALLOT PAPER

Mark X in the square opposite the one candidate for whom you wish to vote

(G) To retain the present Government in office	(O) To replace the present Government by the Official Opposition
JONES, A. <input type="checkbox"/>	WILLIAMSON, G. <input type="checkbox"/>
SMITH, B. <input type="checkbox"/>	PETERS, H. <input type="checkbox"/>
ROBINSON, C. <input type="checkbox"/>	MARTIN, D. <input type="checkbox"/>
MARTIN, D. <input type="checkbox"/>	HARRISON, J. <input type="checkbox"/>
WILLIAMS, E. <input type="checkbox"/>	NEWMAN, J. <input type="checkbox"/>
NOTT, F. <input type="checkbox"/>	FORDSON, K. <input type="checkbox"/>

"For the first time in the history of democracy" he claims "this new form of ballot paper would enable each elector to choose, from either side, the particular candidate whose views seemed most nearly to coincide with his own. Within the broad grouping of pro-government and pro-alternative government candidates, he could vote for the particular personality, the particular shade of outlook, the special interest or item of policy he desired to have represented in parliament. And, surely, with this small change in the method of voting and counting votes, it would be a very big step towards the attainment of a genuine political democracy."

REFORMING THE SENATE

One of the more controversial ideas offered is that the concept of the 'good local member' is wrong. In fact, he describes it as "one of the symptoms of sickness in our present-day parliament" and he presents strong argument in support of its elimination in favour of the concept of the representative as primarily a part of the government, or of the opposition, as the case may be, with his main responsibility the consideration of major public issues.

Mr. Mander also has an intriguing proposal for reforming the Australian Senate, or any Second Chamber, by introducing representation on the basis of the support of a registered group or organisation, other

than a political party; a proposition well worth serious consideration.

P.R. OVERLOOKED

In the opinion of this reviewer, the book has one major fault, one, however, which does not by any means destroy its very considerable contribution to political science: this is that it fails to discuss, even to mention, the system of election known as the Single Transferable Vote (Proportional Representation), which, if instituted, would solve the author's major problem of 'wasted votes' and make unnecessary some of his proposals for achieving the ends of good government. The Proportional Representation Society of N.S.W. might fruitfully take up this issue with Mr. Mander, to their mutual benefit.

This is not to say that Mr. Mander has not rendered a genuine public service by thus presenting his arguments for a true political democracy in such clear, succinct and persuasive language.

*OUR SHAM DEMOCRACY, by A. E. Mander. Alpha Books, Sydney, 1971.

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

LEONARD E. READ

I have long been intrigued by the seeming paradox that the more one knows the more he knows he does not know. This is another way of saying that every gain in knowledge increasingly exposes one to the infinite unknown.

Another aspect of this intriguing paradox: as a person grows in knowledge he is exposed to a new set of friends—and almost certainly faces a dwindling number of old friends. There are many ways to lose friends, of course, but what I am suggesting is that a dwindling audience is *not necessarily* a sign of failure; on the contrary, it may signify personal progress. This is the point I would like to explore.

Ortega presents us with the reality of this problem: So far as ideas are concerned, meditation on any theme, if *positive and honest*, inevitably separates him who does the meditating from the opinion prevailing around him, from that which . . . can be called "public" or "popular" opinion. Every intellectual effort sets us apart from the commonplace, and leads us by hidden and difficult paths to secluded spots where we find ourselves amid unaccustomed thoughts. These are the results of meditation.

Why dwell on this? A simple reason: if you are on the right track and gaining in knowledge but fail to read these signs aright, you may throw in the sponge simply because listeners are few; you may call it quits just before the dawn. In a word, I hope to present an antidote for discouragement, a way of viewing matters that will help to "keep the chip up." Not only yours, but my own! In the area of our concern, it is easy to mistake success for failure.

Why? Simply because success is often equated with a growing number of adherents, failure with a declining number, as if the quality of ideas and the quantity of better thinkers go hand in hand. We tend to expect that any improvement in ideas will automatically attract a wider audience; whereas, quite the opposite might happen.