

Liberal Democracy Restated

Dr. Micklem's "The Idea of Liberal Democracy" *

THIS cannot be cited as a Party document as it was written before the author was invited to become President of the Liberal Party Organisation; but the circumstances enhance its importance even beyond the respect due to the views of such a distinguished Free Churchman and former President of Mansfield College. The book consists of eight essays on democracy, liberty and cognate subjects, all the product of a mind well-stored, sanely balanced and refreshingly free from the influence of "relative truth" evident in so much contemporary writing. And the style makes reading a pleasure.

Democracy, the author reminds us, is not an aim in itself but a form of government designed to promote higher purposes. The qualification to vote is not a natural right and the love of liberty is the love of others not the love of power. Superstitious regard for the one-man-one-vote idea, based as it is on the false creed that all men are equal in capacity, leads to a "collective democracy" in which each individual, regarding politics only as a means to private gain, ends by subordinating himself to the despotism of parties striving for selfish aims. Parliament is reduced to a cockpit for the disciplined agents of special interests and apathy towards public affairs becomes general. To-day we tolerate our democracy from habit, "like an old suit of clothes," but it lacks all the fervour with which Communist peoples regard their institutions.

Dr. Micklem compares this with the liberal democracy in which electors are asked to be not merely over twenty-one and not actually insane, but animated by some degree of intelligent public spirit. And the representatives, elected on principles, not to serve interests, must be allowed freedom to obey their consciences. The hope of creating such a democracy lies in promoting some common agreement on the real function of the State. After a review of the various components necessary for such an agreement Dr. Micklem concludes that the ultimate requirement is a strengthening of the religious spirit in its widest interpretation, not the acceptance of any particular dogma but faith in an eternal order of justice. "'Natural Law' and 'Natural Religion' are the only basis for a tolerable existence . . . and liberal democracy must in the end prevail if its sponsors be found faithful to their insight and conviction."

This conclusion should encourage those few persons who have long been devoting voluntary effort to non-subsidised and officially ignored schools to explain the natural laws that govern human society. And Dr. Micklem's book helps to confirm our faith in liberty and humanity. But in many respects his review is not conclusive. So many admirable passages are immediately damped by grave concessions to authoritarian/collectivist thought. We are left with the impression that under

modern conditions such things as liberty and equal rights can never be accurately known. This must disappoint liberal-minded persons longing for a logical basis for their hopes.

Even in freedom of thought Dr. Micklem makes concessions to the authoritarians. Mill's *Liberty*, he says, is unanswerable but to-day the State cannot allow free education; it must forbid communist schools. This is an admission of failure—but not the failure of free education. To-day control of education is so totalitarian that the humblest private school must first obtain a permit from the Minister. State schooling, which Mill condemned, has paralysed the vitality of thought he knew was necessary to a free society: State-paid teachers dare not encourage those controversies "large and important enough to kindle enthusiasm and stir the mind of a people from its foundations." Had education been truly free, schools would have been so varied and thought so quickened by consequent interchange, that communist fallacies would have been still-born. But education cannot be truly free unless men are free in other respects. Liberty is one, not many.

That the principle cannot be divided is illustrated by Mill's own efforts to consider civil liberty apart from economic liberty. At the end of his admirable book, when he tries to apply his sound theory to taxation it seems to break down. Had he first realised how to apply justice to taxation he could have confirmed his theory. And the question of taxation is an integral part of any general principle of society. No man can attain the higher virtues unless he first supplies his material needs honestly; and that holds good for society.

That Dr. Micklem can denounce plausible fraud in economic matters was strikingly shown by his address to the Liberal Assembly at Southport last year; yet his book omits all reference to the economic aspect of society. Perhaps this reflects the doubts of an honest mind confronted by the fact that current economics avoids giving a clear answer to any important question. But the omission leaves his philosophy incomplete and his readers wondering. His not unfavourable references to the Welfare State—so manifestly fatal to everything he values—are especially puzzling.

To develop one's spirit in freedom is the essence of the Liberal ideal. But, as man's spirit is inseparably enshrined in a material body, the spirit cannot be truly free unless man is free to supply his bodily needs by his own labour. As labour can be applied only on land and to land materials it follows that no social philosophy can make serious claims to be complete unless it is based on a consideration of the equal right to natural opportunity. This is not the highest consideration but it is the first; and if we do not put it first we are left groping hopelessly in mental dilemmas among which, only too often, the light of the spirit grows dim.

F.D.P.

* Christopher Johnson, London, 1957. 12s. 6d.