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The Game of Party Politics

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IDEAS ABOUT DEMOCRACY have not grown commensurately with the increase of population and the growth of knowledge founded on experience, often on disillusion. People feel that greater political freedom has not given them greater economic freedom, and are beginning to wonder why this is. Despite reversions to dictatorship in recent decades, some of which have been upset, it is not generally realised that the 'will to power' is ever present in the human breast and must be watched and combatted even when there is a semblance of popular government. A President or a Prime Minister can be an autocrat though the form of dictatorship is veiled.

A definition of democracy has always been elusive. For one thing, the world has seldom known a true democracy. The complications of life and the intracacies of industry and trade lead away from democracy. Primitive communities, because they were smaller and simpler, were nearer to its spirit. In ancient times it was easier to bestow equal rights and equality of opportunity on all than it is to-day. It is hardly possible now to arrange a form of government in which supreme power is vested in the people collectively, and is administered by them or by officers appointed by them. It is well to recognize this since it partly explains the sense of unreality that has undermined the hold of democratic principles upon public opinion and has paved the way to increased authority by bureaucracy.

Even if all the reforms advocated by liberal opinion at the time of the Reform Bill (1832) had been enacted by now (and few of them have been), it is unlikely that we should have escaped from the present socialistic regime everywhere. Incidentally, it is amusing to note that William Cobbett thanked Americans in that year for subduing the oligarchs whose arrogance and stupidity led to the defeat of the English government because thereby the boroughmonger Parliament was prevented from subduing Englishmen. In spite of this help over 150 years ago it is probably correct to say that Englishmen enjoy less personal and economic freedom than the average American, but that neither enjoys that political liberty on which both pride themselves. That this is due to modern developments in society is well emphasised by Cecil Chesterton in his excellent short "History of the United States." From his early pages I quote these few sentences:

The American colonists, during the eighteenth century, enjoyed what a simple society left to itself almost always enjoys, under whatever forms —the substance of democracy. That fact must be emphasized, because without a recognition of it the flaming response which met the first proclamation of theoretic democracy would be unintelligible. It is explicable only when we remember that to the unspoiled conscience of man as man democracy will ever be the most self-evident of truths. It is the complexity of our civilization that blinds us to its self-evidence, teaching us to acquiesce in irrational privilege as inevitable, and at last to see nothing strange in being ruled by a class, whether of nobles or of mere parliamentarians.

That attempts to establish equal rights and privileges for all have so largely failed needs examining anew.

I

Political Obstacles to Economic Democracy

IT IS AN OLD HABIT of those in positions of power to draw attention from economic issues to political ones, whether these be constitutions purporting to extend the principle of home rule or issues dealing with foreign politics. When a people learn to drop party strife and sectarian bigotry and concentrate on economic reforms, as did the Irish in the Home Rule struggle in the days of Michael Davitt, purely political and constitutional issues are paraded by those interested in opposing the reforms. It is an old story and a common experience. As Burke has said: "The people never give up their liberties but under some delusion."

The forms of government, the gaining of the vote, the selection of the candidates to a representative assembly, the distribution of seats, the position to concede to minorities can all be made to appear very important; and in certain circumstances they are important. But what is the teaching of history? It is that the common man wants to be left alone to get on with his own affairs so long as he can attain some security in life. Even voting in an election is coming at length to be looked upon as an acquired right of but minor importance. Generally a citizen can only be worked up into an interest in political affairs when placed in special or chronic insecurity. Then the rhetoric of the statesmen can shake him out of his simple-hearted acceptance of life—or it could once; but not so easily today, for the working people are less attracted and have less faith in the speeches of politicians and radio announcers, and the writings of the press.

The history of Ireland for the last 160 years and right up to the present day offers an excellent illustration of the way political and constitutional issues have been exploited by the politicians to thwart economic reforms and the chances of establishing a better democratic system. As long ago

as 1847 the great Irishman, James F. Lalor, had written: "Had the people of Ireland been the landlords of Ireland, not a human creature would have died of hunger," (in the famine of those times) and he asserted that "the people ought to decide on grounds of policy and economy that rents for land should be paid to themselves for public purposes." In 1881 the Land League had become the *de facto* government of Ireland. Religious differences ceased to divide the people when the land question was raised, *i.e.* when economic reforms were under discussion. When Davitt came North his meeting was presided over by the Master of an Orange Lodge.

But the next year saw the slowing down of the work of the League, and concentration on parliamentary action for political Home Rule. A few years passed; in 1886 there was a general election. At this a small majority of voters were in favour of Mr. Gladstone and of Home Rule for Ireland. Although Gladstone gained a majority of voters to support his Home Rule policy, this majority failed to secure sufficient seats in Parliament to carry out his policy. There followed a succession of obstacles to sound reforms for Ireland, so that to this day, despite many changes, a continuance of political unrest, economic distress and unsatisfactory religious emancipation have persisted.

Present-day political influences are just the same. Once upon a time I thought what a pity it was that more attention was not given to "foreign affairs," particularly to the ways to encourage commercial freedom and true friendliness between the peoples of the world. To-day I think what a pity it is that so much time is spent in studying matters far away from home instead of concentrating on, say, the housing shortage. Truly it has been said: "The eyes of the fool are in the ends of the earth." But I fear it is not just stupidity, on the part at all events of those who gain positions of authority, that so much space and time on platform, on the air, or in the press are so constantly being devoted to these issues. And, after all the efforts made, how futile are the so-called "peace meetings" of the representatives of "The Powers"! It were better these persons did not meet: they each know the past of the other too well!

II

The Blinders of Party Political Bias

CERTAIN FEATURES of party political contests are harmful to clear thinking and to the adoption of sound policies; and these are resorted to in most countries, whether labelled democratic or not. There is a perpetual stirring up of Party political bias. Party prejudices, often passed on from parents to children, sometimes fixed to certain classes, form one of the greatest obstacles to sane thinking on political matters.

I was talking not long ago with the middle-aged wife of a keen Labour supporter who had married over thirty years ago. All her relatives had always been staunch Conservatives; not only would they not discuss any sociological subject with her and her husband, but throughout the whole period they would not deign, because of their strong prejudices, to visit the couple, and only one, living thousands of miles away, communicated with her. The very same day I met a man who had recently left the Labour for the Communist Party. He had not only no good word to say for any Conservative but neither had he one for any Labour person or policy, nor would he allow any criticism of the Soviets. How can reasonable progress in political thought be made in such circumstances?

I judge from afar that things are not very different in America. I base this view partly because, as an English physician, I cannot help feeling that, in the last months of F. D. Roosevelt's life, party political bias was allowed to override loyalty to the professional instincts and duties of one or two of the late President's doctors. Otherwise it is difficult to understand how the President, so obviously a spent and sick man, was permitted to continue in public life (especially in those very difficult times) and why such precautions were taken to keep his serious condition hidden.

Are not the aims for bettering the lot of man generally the same whatever label attaches to a man or woman? Are not quite a number of the keenest minds those who take an interest in party politics? Perhaps it is nearer the truth nowadays to say "Was it not so once?" Yet true progress is best fostered through free play of human minds in friendly discussion and in co-operation. As Johnathan Swift said three hundred years ago: "Reason cannot be cultivated when mingled, obscured or discoloured by passion and interest." Reason, he continues, should not lead to argument for it should strike you with immediate conviction. The Yahoo slave (the human) described in Swift's voyage to the Houyhnhnms who are the Yahoo's masters told their slave they found it was with extreme difficulty that they could understand the meaning of the word *opinion*, or how a point could be disputable; because *reason* taught them to affirm or deny only where they were certain; and beyond their knowledge they could do neither. Reason and knowledge have advanced since Swift's time—but not in politics.

To what a pass political wrangles have brought us. They have brought us to a new despotism which is certainly not democracy. The parties, while in reality having similar aims and no essential differences in their policies, pretend to be poles asunder. They now all follow like methods of taxing, of war-making, of providing social services, etc., or methods very

closely akin. But their stock in trade, at election time particularly, is abuse of their opponents whom they try to outbid in promises. At all events this is true by and large in England.

Perhaps the people of the U.S.A. may yet save themselves from a further descent into a planned economy, such as most countries have now with a huge bureaucracy based on heavy taxation and public borrowing. But I am fearful. The history of Roosevelt's regime seems to indicate that Americans are still much biased by Party Political loyalties; or would it be more correct to say, by the chances of getting paid employment directly or indirectly out of public funds? When these are nearer than ever to a bankrupt condition can either party be relied upon to have the courage to resist dependence upon a false and purely temporary prosperity through war, and to reverse completely all the slipshod policies of the last eighteen to twenty years which have gradually brought people to the present chaos?

III

Party Politics and Popular Government

THE INSTITUTION of party politics has had important influences, deleterious for the most part, upon popular representation and government. It had different origins in the United States and in England, and it will be to the point to survey them briefly.

In America the beginning of parties is said to date from about 1828 at the time sectional struggles where centering around three economic issues—tariffs, public lands, and internal improvements. In the North West of most importance were low-priced public lands, a low tariff, no internal improvements; on the sea-board South, a low tariff, no internal improvements at federal expense, high-priced public lands; and in the North Atlantic States, a high tariff, high-priced public lands, internal improvements. Out of sectional conflicts was born the Jacksonian Democratic party, in the main based on the South and West, on the smaller farmers and the town workers. D. W. Brogan says in his "Politics and Law in the United States" (Cambridge, 1941) that "This combination governed American politics, until the clash between the Southern Slave States, whose economic policy was now dominated by the Planter interests, and the Western Farmers and Northern workers became too bitter to be compromised."

The political fight in 1860 did not at the time make the sectional issue plain because of the veils which, as so often happens, were thrown over the realities by the politicians. Political parties must invent means whereby they can show a united front to their opponents though their members are frequently disunited in reality on important issues. American

parties are cleverer in managing conflicting interests and emotions in their ranks by showing more toleration of diversity, and by their manipulations, than English parties. But the party system in the United States has often hindered the progress of democracy by preventing free discussion of really vital issues. It was not provided for in the American constitution: it was, in fact, provided against—in vain. George Washington in his farewell address pointed out that some influences of party government tended to produce dictatorships—and he was not thinking of Presidents of the United States! He said:

> The alternate domination of one faction over another . . . is itself a frightful despotism. The disorders and miseries which result, gradually incline the minds of men to seek security and repose in the absolute power of an individual.

In England, too, the stifling of free discussion of really vital issues on which it is known that opposite views are held within the party for the sake of the party is common practice; for example, the question of 'protection' amongst Conservatives in the days of Balfour, and that of land nationalization by purchase in the days of Snowden.

The Party System in England was invented at the end of the seventeenth century to enable William III to secure steady parliamentary support for his war upon Louis XIV. Up to that time, government posts were filled by the fittest men regardless of party. Whatever merits there are in the party system in vogue ever since then, except during some formidable war, it is generally admitted that party tyranny is base.

A representative assembly where the representatives are mere voting dummies, unable to speak or vote on the merits of a resolution, lest damage to the party results, is not a truly democratic body. The real safeguards are publicity and the free expression of opinion. But the party meetings which prescribe how a member of the party shall vote are secret. As Josiah Wedgwood (later Lord Wedgwood) so cogently pointed out, the party he served so ably—but with truly independent spirit—for so many years, the Labour Party, would have had him "undertake to accept and act in harmony with the standing orders of the Parliamentary Labour party." He would not do it. The same discipline at the crack of the "Three-lined Whip" is still exercised; but few are those who act independently since the day of the late Lord Wedgwood, partly because of the financial dependence on their salaries and emoluments.

The British system, so different from the American (possessing, however, its own faults), creates an autocratic Cabinet chosen by the Prime Minister appointed by the King, very often on the advice of the Prime Minister's

predecessor, from leaders in the party which has secured a majority of seats at an election. The Ministers are able to impose a strict party discipline by suggesting disagreeable consequences of voting against them. As Bernard Shaw has said: "The true party man sacrifices everything, even his country—in fact especially his country—to keep his party in office."

IV

Party Politics and Democratic Control

IN THE CASE of any system of popular government based on the English model, it is essential that the Executive be controlled by Parliament and Parliament itself by the people. Yet, from one cause or another, this double control has broken down and the defects of the party system have contributed to this. As Sir Frederick Pollock, a great authority on constitutional law, wrote just before the end of the first world war: "Our whole system of Ministerial and Parliamentary control has been allowed to drift into an unmanageable condition." Things have got worse since he wrote that, or at all events there has been no material change. Lord Wedgwood in his "Testament to Democracy" (1942) says (p. 50)

that the power of the Prime Minister gives him immense dictatorial power over Members of Parliament, checks the formation of small Parties and the independence of Members, that it replaces reason by force, that it is undemocratic. *Pro tanto,* the Prime Minister is not responsible to Parliament, but Parliament is responsible to him. He gets in this way for his Government a security of tenure, limited only by the legal date of dissolution.

A further point of great importance about the way in which democracies carry on is this: Decisions of enormous importance are not always referred, before being made and acted upon, either to the electorate or to the legislative assembly. Lord Hugh Cecil in a foreword to the little book on "The Case for Electoral Reform" (1938) wrote:

Great executive decisions which sometimes outweigh everything else in importance must be taken by an oligarchy. For example, the decision to go to war in 1914, and the decision to go off the gold standard in 1931 were taken by a small number of individuals, even the House of Commons having only a nominal control over the decision.

There is some truth regarding his "must be taken," but the party political game has led increasingly to far too much secrecy and a good deal of deception, (perhaps never carried to such excess as it was by F. D. Roosevelt).

In these circumstances, and considering the heated prejudices so often called up when political policies and actions are under discussion, how can

people be brought to the frame of mind for imbibing the teachings of those who maintain that much in social intercourse is under inescapable natural laws? This doctrine was put forward by the Physiocrats at the end of the eighteenth century in France and has been developed a good deal further since then. Yet to this day most people believe human efforts are paramount. Because they are ignorant of any natural sociological laws, they consider that the obtuseness of their political "enemies" is the cause of the hardships which beset us. They ascribe these to the influence of the depraved heart, as our forefathers ascribed pestilence to the influence of the evil eye of witches, and they cannot be persuaded to open their minds to receive thoughts about politics and sociology which are quite revolutionary.

A useful illustration of the evil effects, in world affairs and over a long period, of some of our present political practices is derived from a study in a few sentences of Lloyd George's coalition government in 1918 at the end of the first World War. He won the so-called "coupon" election on the vindictive cries "Hang the Kaiser"; "Make Germany squeal"; "Squeese them like an orange till the pips pop out." He secured 472 seats for his coalition government against only 130 by his opponents, though their supporters cast 4,675,000 votes against 5,101,000 for Lloyd George's party. As a consequence at the conference at Versailles he was incapable, because he needed to retain his parliamentary support, of frustrating Clemenceau and subscribing to the moderating influences of Woodrow Wilson. That was a tragedy the effects of which contributed to make the war not a "war to end war" but the breeder of future wars.

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The New Lab on the Campus

TO MANY PEOPLE the title Statistical Laboratory (such as the one on the campus of Iowa State College, or those at the great universities) is a puzzler, for it lacks the usual paraphernalia of research in the natural sciences. It is concerned with methods of collecting data, testing the efficiency of alternative plans, and assessing the validity of the results. Many people call on it for advice about statistical problems arising in quality control, the best way to design laboratory and field experiments, or the kind of samples of human population best suited for use in solving specific problems. Its work has great practical value.

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