

THE CASE FOR A RESTRICTED FRANCHISE

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“Whether the discovery of America by Columbus has been of advantage or loss to the civilized peoples of the world would form an interesting thesis for discussion.”

THIS is the opening sentence of that interesting but caustic little book by Sir H. L. Griffin, *The Great Republic*. By way of introduction to my dry but not unimportant subject, let me paraphrase it thus:—

Whether the gradual extension of the Franchise, to the point of practically universal suffrage, has been of advantage or otherwise to the supposedly progressive and intelligent people of Canada would form an interesting thesis for discussion, were it not that the result of the discussion would inevitably be an overwhelming decision in favour of the *otherwise*.

True it is that Canada is not the only country in which the proletariat, men and women, have been “politically emancipated” as the honeyed and high-sounding phrase goes, for in all—or nearly all—civilized countries of the world, in which representative Government has for many years been recognized and adopted as the best available polity, the suffrage, or the right to vote, has been extended to many classes of the people that in the early periods of that polity were rigidly and arbitrarily excluded from participation in the conduct of public affairs. For the origin and early stages of this movement we must go back at least a century and a half, anyhow to the latter part of the eighteenth century, when the echoes of the French Revolution awoke the middle and lower classes of Europe to a realization of their powers and their rights.

In England the present political status of the people is directly due to a rapid succession of measures or concessions, having their beginning in the early years of the last century and resulting in the enfranchisement of almost the whole adult male population.

“The nineteenth century alone has witnessed an enormous extension of political power to the masses amongst most of the advanced peoples included in our civilization. In England the

list of measures, aiming either directly or indirectly at the emancipation and the raising of the lower classes of the people, that have been placed on the statute-book in the lifetime of even the present generation, is an imposing one, and it continues yearly to be added to." (Benjamin Kidd, *Social Evolution*.)

Interesting and instructive as would be an exhaustive history of the origin and development of the electoral Franchise, it would be for a two volume treatise rather than a brief *Review* article, and quite beyond my powers and intention. All I essay to do in these few pages is to discuss, perhaps in a more or less crude and superficial manner, the electoral status of the people of Canada and its influence and effects on the body politic.

The idea has been advanced by more than one eminent theorist in the science of government that the ideal polity is an absolute or despotic monarchy, if only there could be found a despot of such superlative and towering energy, ability and virtue—to say nothing of willingness—to undertake and exercise the tremendous duties and responsibilities that would attach to such a position. Unfortunately we cannot send to another planet in a more advanced stage of development for a suitable demigod or super-man, and so we must, perforce, adopt some other polity and do the best we can with such merely human material as we may find. It would be hard to find to-day even a theorist who would contend that an absolute monarchy is even ideally the best form of government for the modern world or for any civilized part of it. Representative or popular government, proved to be as practicable and efficient in a limited monarchy as in a republic, is the outcome of social and political evolution. The result of centuries of experience in strife and turmoil, it is the survival of the fittest recognized as such and universally adopted. That it has not yet reached its limits of developmental efficiency goes without saying. It is discouraging to reflect that in the past half century such modifications in its practical operation as have been made have tended rather away from than towards the high efficiency of which it is undoubtedly capable and which cannot be realized without the deepest study and unremitting attention to the details of its practical application.

The recognition of representative government as the best available polity is one thing, and its establishment or constitution is another. Meaning, as it does, the government of the people by representatives of the people chosen by themselves from among themselves, it implies that there are to be found among the people a sufficient number of such men—or women—who are willing, and capable of representing the people in a duly constituted body, and of

collectively exercising governmental functions for the advantage of the people they represent and of the country at large. It is obvious that representative government would not, for example, be applicable to barbarous or uncivilized people, like the native tribes of Central Africa, because among them would not be found men of sufficient culture and intelligence to understand or take any part in the government of their fellow people or their country. In Canada, as in other civilized countries, while capable and intelligent men may be in the minority, there are plenty of them from whom to select and constitute suitable and efficient governing bodies for the Dominion and all its constituent Provinces, if our selective machinery were adequate to the discovery of those suitable and efficient representatives.

It needs no argument to show that the efficiency of any governing body as a whole depends on the quality of its constituent units. It is a truism that no stream can be purer than its source.

The qualities of any elective body are, more or less, a faithful reflex of the qualities of the electors. If the majority of the electors are ignorant and corrupt, their elected representatives will probably be ignorant and corrupt. If the majority of the electors are honest, intelligent and educated, their representatives—or most of them—will exhibit those estimable qualities, and their legislative duties will, on the whole, be performed with probity and intelligence and with a single eye to the faithful service of their constituents and their country. These statements are admittedly platitudes, but they are capable of expansion and application. If the whole body of the electorate were ignorant and corrupt, its elected representatives could hardly be otherwise, individually or collectively, and the acts and proceedings of those representatives would be characterized by ignorance and corruption. The state of the country which they essayed to govern would be worse than under a despot or under any other conceivable polity, and Representative Government would collapse and be swept away in anarchy and revolution. If the whole body of the electorate were honest, educated and intelligent, we should have not only the ideal government, but the perfect system of government, under which there would be realized the object of all government—the happiness and welfare of the governed. “Happiness is our being’s end and aim, and happiness belongs to righteousness.” (Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Dogma*) “Righteousness exalteth a nation.” (*Prov. XLV. 34*)

But the electorate is neither wholly bad nor wholly good, and the same must necessarily be true of its representatives and of the governing bodies composed of those representatives. Therefore, the better the representatives the better the government, and—

to go one step further and state a fact which has apparently been lost sight of—the better the electorate the better the representatives. That the last fact has been either lost sight of, or more probably ignored and defied by the politicians, is shown by the tendency of electoral legislation ever since Confederation, which, step by step, has depreciated, or worsened, the electorate as a whole by the gradual extension of the franchise to the lowest strata of the people. The electors elect their representatives, and the representatives elect the electors. This sounds both circular and silly, but it is perfectly true, for the suffrage—the right to vote—is granted only by Acts of Parliament that prescribe the qualifications to be possessed by the elector as indispensable conditions precedent to the voting privilege. And Acts of Parliament are laws enacted and put in force by the representatives of the people.

It would appear that the tremendous importance of the whole franchise matter, and the supreme desirability of probity and wisdom in its management and practical operation, are not fully realized by the general public. To illustrate this I may remind the reader that elective bodies in Canada,—the Senate and Commons of the Federal Government, and the Legislative Councils and Houses of Assembly of the nine Provinces of the Dominion—comprise no less than 876 men and 2 women. (I raise my hat to you, intrepid ladies.) The Federal Senate and the Legislative Councils of Quebec and Nova Scotia—the only Provinces rejoicing in Upper Houses—are not elected directly by the people, but appointed by the representatives of the people, which comes to the same thing, so far as my point is concerned. Now supposing that the whole of these 878 legislators—about twice as many as are really necessary to carry on the legislative business of the whole country—could be elected by voters of the highest possible character and possessed of the admirable qualifications of integrity, education and intelligence, how would they conduct the legislative business of the country? What sort of laws and Acts and Statutes would they turn out? Popular Government would be glorified and idealized; the welfare, prosperity and happiness of the people would be assured. It is hardly too much to say that the country would “blossom like the rose.” Hear Lecky on National Welfare and its Elements :

Its foundation is laid in pure domestic life, in commercial integrity, in a high standard of moral worth and of public spirit, in simple habits, in courage, uprightness, and a certain soundness and moderation of judgment which springs quite as much from character as from intellect. If you would form a wise judgment of the future of a nation, observe carefully whether these qualities

are increasing or decaying. Observe especially what qualities count for most in public life. Is character becoming of greater or less importance? Are the men who obtain the highest posts in the nation men of whom, in private life and irrespective of party, competent judges speak with genuine respect? Are they of sincere convictions, consistent lives, indisputable integrity? It is by observing this moral current that you can best cast the horoscope of a nation."*

Now if there is any country in the world that is capable of being made to "blossom like the rose", if there is any country that has natural resources in fullest measure, the elements and essentials of national prosperity and healthy development, vast and varied stores of everything that constitutes greatness in a country and that make for the welfare and prosperity of its inhabitants, that country is Canada. Therefore, if any country imperatively needs the best government that its people can devise and establish, that country is Canada. Further, if there is any period in its history in which Canada urgently needs the best possible government, it is now and in the coming years, many rather than few, during which, faced by problems of unprecedented difficulty and magnitude, we are painfully struggling back to sanity and solvency after those four terrible years.

I shall hardly lay myself open to a charge of either libel or lèse majesté when I say—what we all know—that these 878 elected representatives are certainly not the best that could have been found in our population of 8,000,000; neither are they the worst. Reflecting the qualities of the electorate, they are somewhere between the best and the worst. Now if the people elect the legislators, and the legislators elect the people that elect the legislators by Acts and Statutes prescribing the qualifications to be possessed as indispensable conditions precedent to the exercising of the suffrage, it is obvious that we shall never improve our legislative bodies or their Acts and Proceedings in the conduct of the business of the country, unless and until we do something. Surely no man of courage or common sense will admit that the whole subject is *praeter curam*, so we must do one of three things; (a) raise the moral and intellectual status of the electors, or (b) take away the privilege of the suffrage from those persons who are unfit to exercise it by reason of ignorance, illiteracy or general moral obliquity, dishonesty and unrighteousness, or (c) assign the voting power on a sliding or graduated scale adapted to the individual fitness of the electors to exercise it.

* "The Political Value of History" by W. E. H. Lecky.

The only thing that will accomplish (a), the improvement of the knowledge and ethics of the people, is education, but inasmuch as this—elementary education at least—is already universal and compulsory, and superior or higher education practically open to all, it is difficult to say what can be done in this direction, except by the introduction into our public schools of a course of primary ethics, even if at the expense of “book-larnin’.” By ethics, I mean of course not religion, but righteousness, not creeds and dogmas, but the “golden rule.”

The first element of good government, therefore, being the virtue and intelligence of the human beings composing the community, the most important point of excellence which any form of government can possess is to promote the virtue and intelligence of the people themselves. The first question in respect to any political institutions is, how far they tend to foster in the members of the community the various desirable qualities, moral and intellectual; or rather (following Bentham’s more complete classification) moral, intellectual and active. The government which does this the best has every likelihood of being the best in all other respects, since it is on these qualities, so far as they exist in the people, that all possibility of goodness in the practical operations of the government depends.*

The improvement of the electorate by education is a matter of time, and a *long* time. There are more practical and promising points from which the problem may be attacked. An eminently feasible project is (b) the restriction of the franchise, though it would be attended by grave difficulties and strenuous opposition. If this should be denounced as an arbitrary interference with the rights of ignorance and unfitness, it may rightly be contended that it is a wholly justifiable interference, due to the exigencies of good government. It is certain that no free and independent citizen would surrender without a struggle so useful and *profitable* a prerogative as the suffrage. It is indisputable that the electorate comprises a very considerable number of people who, by reason of illiteracy, incompetence or moral obliquity, should not be permitted to have any voice in the conduct of public affairs, even to the extent of the suffrage, and they should be weeded out under due process of law by a careful and drastic revision of the qualifications demanded of voters. These should be, at a minimum:—

- (1) Over 23 and not over 85 years of age.
- (2) A British subject for at least five years and resident in his

* John Stuart Mill, “Representative Government.”

or her province of registration and voting for not less than twelve consecutive months.

(3) Guiltless of crime or fraud for not less than five years prior to election.

(4) Of sound mental health and average intelligence.

(5) Educated to the extent of at least two years at a common school, and with a knowledge of simple arithmetic and elementary geography, at least of Canada, together with some "general" knowledge.

(6) Solvent, and owner of real or personal property to the value of at least \$500, and a tax payer of at least \$25.00 per annum.

(7) Not a recipient of parish or public relief for at least two years prior to the election.

J. S. Mill long ago put these points admirably, but we have disregarded his advice. He wrote in 1867 :

"I regard it as wholly inadmissible that any person should participate in the suffrage without being able to read, write, and, I will add, perform the common operations of arithmetic."

"It is not useful, but hurtful, that the constitution of the country should declare ignorance to be entitled to as much political power as knowledge."

"It is also important that the assembly which votes the taxes, either general or local, should be elected exclusively by those who pay something towards the taxes imposed."—(*Representative Government.*)

It is worth noting that this appeared just a few years before Disraeli lowered the franchise by the Bill which Carlyle so aptly satirised in the paper called *Shooting Niagara*.

At the present time the only qualifications—practically uniform for Federal and Provincial Elections—are:

(a) Of either sex and not less than 21 years of age.

(b) A British subject.

(c) A resident of the county for a year preceding the election.

It will be seen that these qualifications do not exclude the illiterate, the ignorant, the destitute, or even the criminal and the insane. That such parodies and absurdities in equipment for a national duty are well calculated to bring representative government into discredit and contempt is obvious and certain, and this cannot fail of demonstration within a measurable period of time; nay, the times are not lacking in evidence of it to-day. If the undesirables in the electorate were in any considerable minority, it would not be so bad; their influence for evil would be largely nullified by the preponderance of worthy and intelligent citizens, but if not in actual numerical majority they are quite numerous enough to

exercise a very real and potent influence of a most undesirable kind on the general character and tone of all the legislative bodies constituted by their suffrages. Every thoughtful and patriotic Canadian must recognize and admit that it is absolutely deplorable and wrong, nay nothing short of an outrage, that the worst characters in the community, men and women in the lowest stratum of the whole social fabric, should have exactly the same voice in the conduct of the public affairs of the country—for that is what it amounts to—as the highest and best and most worthy; that the vote of an illiterate, a pauper and a near-criminal, a depraved and worthless person, should have exactly the same value as that of a professional man, a literary or scientific man of high attainment, a merchant or a manufacturer, or any eminent leader in commerce, industry and finance.

Since Confederation the franchise has several times, and by successive stages, been broadened by Acts of Federal and Provincial Legislatures, reducing the qualifications of voters. Up to a few years ago the suffrage was limited to the male sex, and possession of a certain small value in property was one of the essentials, but even these modest requirements have been swept away, and, almost incredible as it is, *there has never been an educational qualification.*

The reasons that actuated our legislators in framing and enacting these laws belong to the unsavoury field of party politics and electioneering tactics. As each party enjoying the sweets of office and patronage felt the end of its reign approaching, it naturally deemed it good strategy to extend the franchise, in the confident expectation that the newly endowed electors in their pride and grateful appreciation of the glorious privilege of the suffrage would be sure to poll their newly acquired votes for the party to which they were indebted for the boon. And so it went on from one election to another, until to-day the legal qualifications actually permit inmates of insane asylums and penitentiaries to vote, and the only exclusions from the voter's lists are judges, children and domestic animals; probably they will come next. But what a prostitution of popular government, or what a mockery and negation of its spirit and intent, its meaning, its possibilities! It must be felt by every thoughtful man who is not hide-bound by partisanship, every man of education, intelligence and independent opinion, who has followed even superficially the trend of our political and national history, who has watched the all-too-tardy development of our splendid country, in so far as that development is dependent upon, and inseparable from political issues and considerations, that a very large number of

our political and administrative blunders and follies have been due, in the last analysis, to the fact that the balance of power, or at any rate altogether too much power, is in the hands of incompetent and undesirable people,—in a word, to universal franchise. The political emancipation of the people has outstripped their social emancipation, and their cultural and educational evolution, which is the most pernicious form of putting the cart before the horse.

I have left the third of my suggested panaceas to the last, and I shall have to condense into small compass the pages that might be written in favour of it.

If all the people in Canada were asked to subscribe money for some great national object, a war memorial, or other great and worthy thing, it would not be fair and reasonable to ask the poor man for a dollar when he could afford only twenty-five cents, nor should we be satisfied with a contribution of a dollar from a rich and prominent man, who could afford to give a hundred or a thousand dollars. The men and women of Canada are asked to contribute of their wisdom, their experience, their knowledge and their probity to the establishment and maintenance of the governing bodies of the Dominion by choosing and electing representatives thereto, so that our public affairs may be conducted in the best possible manner by the best possible people, possessed in larger measure than their fellow citizens of experience, knowledge, wisdom and probity, who can be found and induced and elected to represent the people in our deliberative and legislative bodies. Therefore, if we wish to have the best possible government it is evident, besides being both possible and proper, that those people of the community whose duty and privilege it is to elect representatives, and who are the fortunate possessors of the very essential qualities enumerated above, should contribute more of them than those who have them in lesser degree, or who lack them. This can be accomplished only by giving those in the former class a louder voice or a preponderating influence in their voting power, which means a graduated franchise or *plural voting*.

I am aware that this is a very radical and drastic suggestion, and one that will inevitably be assailed by serious opposition and confronted by grave difficulties, but that it is neither impossible nor even impracticable I am profoundly convinced. I am also aware that it is not the practice in any country in which representative government is the prevailing polity, but this is no argument against it, and if Canada, with far-seeing wisdom and admirable

and characteristic boldness, were to adopt it, there is little doubt that other countries would follow our courageous example.

When so eminent an authority as John Stuart Mill, an expert in the science of government, can advocate it with such force and cogency, and set forth its practicability in such plain and convincing language, it behooves us to give it our most serious and careful consideration.

Let me close with one more quotation from the 8th Chapter of his admirable work :

Until there shall have been devised, and until opinion is willing to accept, some mode of plural voting, which may assign to education, as such, the degree of superior influence due to it, and sufficient as a counterpoise to the numerical weight of the least educated class; for so long, the benefits of completely universal suffrage cannot be obtained without bringing with them, as it appears to me, a chance of more than equivalent evils.

PAUL'S HIRED HOUSE

A. L. Fraser

He went at last through old Rome's guarded gate,
 Not as a victor in his cruel car
 Followed by vanquished men, or spoils of war,
 But as a slave! and yet he conquered Fate,
 And made his hardship on his service wait,
 His room a fulcrum, and his chains a bar
 To move the world,—an influence greater far
 Than senate ever knew; for contemplate
 How pure Devotion paced that sacred floor;
 Or Memory's wings beat out o'er land and sea;
 How Penitence beheld from that wide door
 A bridge to Virtue; or how Charity
 Unpacked her load, and then, returning, bore
 A handful of such leaves as fadeless be.