

WAS FRENCH DEMOCRACY A FAILURE?

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AT the end of a great war that is being fought to save the principles of democracy, it has become almost sacrilege to suggest that a democratic government may not always serve effectively, that it may even contain within itself the seeds of its decay. It has become a platitude to ascribe the fall of France to the Bonnets and the Lavals, to the bankers, the industrialists, the corrupt politicians and journalists, who were ready to sell their country for their own advantage; if this reasoning be valid, it is only too easy to go on and assert that the French parliamentary government was perfectly sound, if only it had been given a fair chance to work, free from the interference of vested interests. This attitude of mind has been consciously encouraged, for it simplifies the issues and enables foreigners to feel sure that they know what the Free French were fighting for; what, indeed, they were fighting for themselves. But is it true? Will a parliamentary government always succeed? The answer to this question is important, for it will affect to a considerable degree the way in which people approach some of the most important problems of the peace, the degree of approval they will bestow on governments that are set up not only in France, but in other European countries as well.

The issue is a complex one, with those who advocate Socialism or Communism seeming at first glance to hold all the cards. To take France as the most outstanding example: if its fall was due wholly to the faults of capital, of the wealthy, of the vested interests, the establishment of a considerable measure of Socialism or Communism is the obvious answer; if its fall was, on the other hand, the result of failure of the parliamentary system, Communism at any rate would once more stand to gain, for it has never included any belief in parliamentary democracy as England or the United States understands the term. Conservatives and Liberals naturally like neither of these alternatives. In their political and economic anxiety they have minimized the issue of Capital as against Communism in France and have drifted into assuming the rather untenable position that France's fall was very largely due to some peculiar and ill-defined poison that spread through the ranks of the French financiers and industrialists, and atrophied all sense of patriotism

and fair play. They have maintained that the French parliament was sound at heart, but that, during the last twenty-five years, it had never been permitted proper exercise.

Even if this were true, it would be a very unfortunate account, because it leads inevitably to the conclusion that if only a parliamentary democracy is set up in a country and is given an honest start, all will be well. This was England's attitude back in the 19th century; this was very largely the attitude of the Congress of Versailles in 1919, and it had disastrous results. Parliamentary democracy, set up in imitation of England, had been a failure in Italy and Spain for fifty years, and it was a failure in a good many of the states in which it was established after the last Great War. We are now talking a great deal about re-educating our enemies: we do not say so, but at the back of many people's minds this means, in the political sphere, inducing them to adopt a parliamentary or congressional democracy. Even if people are trained in its use, even if they are anxious to enjoy it, what right have we to suppose that it will work in other countries, just because it has worked in England, in her Dominions and in the United States?

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An examination of the reasons for the failure of the parliamentary democracy in France will be instructive; for it *was* in part a failure, even though Frenchmen were fully awake to its advantages; and, moreover, this failure was undoubtedly one of the reasons for the fall of France.

In considering the government of France the outstanding danger lies in thinking that it is really like that of England or Canada, just because each has a representative parliament equipped with Prime Minister and Cabinet. This is far from being the case. On the other hand, when the differences that exist are recognized, they are too often summed up by superficial English observers as being those which follow from the fact that France possesses a constitution while England has none, that France is rigid in its government organization, while England is flexible. This also is quite untrue: in fact, as was shown by the events of 1940, there is very little more difficulty in changing the so-called constitution of the French republic than in altering a law of the British monarchy.

England has her King, House of Lords, and House of Commons complete with Prime Minister and Cabinet; France her President, Senate and Chamber of Deputies also with Prime

Minister and Cabinet, but there are really wide differences between the two governments. Most of these differences do not matter here, for they have not interfered with the working of the parliamentary system in France; but three of them are of real importance, because in them lies the legal root of the trouble inherent in French democratic government.

In the first place the President, unlike the King, still chooses, in fact as well as in form, the man who shall be the next Prime Minister of France. What is the reason for this difference, for the apparent legal power of each ruler is the same? In England or in Canada the selection of the Prime Minister has become practically automatic:—he is the leader of the party that holds the majority in the House of Commons, and for nearly fifty years it has been the members of the party who decide who shall be their leader. Here there is no room for royal choice. But in France this is not the case; no single party has ever held an absolute majority in the Chamber of Deputies. Therefore the President names an important member of the Chamber or of the Senate, who looks to him as though he were the strong man of the moment, and it is only after this has been done that the would-be Prime Minister sets to work to build up a majority to support him. Of course the President would not nominate a man to whom a clear majority of the deputies were hostile, but there is always left to him a wide choice of leading men in the many parties into which the French Chamber is split. Though the President will normally seek advice in making his decision, it is his decision that is final. This not only gives him very considerable political power, it also leads to political instability and intrigue. Yet there seems to be no workable alternative for it, so long as the multi-party system continues to exist in France. Therein lies the real trouble.

The second important difference is to be found in the constitution and position of the French Senate as compared with that of the English House of Lords or the Canadian Senate. In France the Senate enjoys almost complete parliamentary equality with the Lower House, and in some ways it is even more powerful. Its members are elected for a term of nine years, one-third of them retiring every three years. But they are not directly elected by the people, differing in this from the Chamber of Deputies. Instead, the senators from each department are chosen by an electoral college consisting of the deputies and the members of the *Conseil General* for the depart-

ment, the members of the councils of all the *arrondissements* within the department, and anything from one to twenty-four delegates from each commune in the department, the number of the delegates depending very roughly upon the population of the commune. How rough this approximation is can be seen whenever a large town comes into the picture: Rouen and Le Havre, for example, have between them almost exactly the same population as the rest of the department of Seine-Inferieure, yet they each have only twenty-four electors and the rest of the department has 877. Therefore in the body of voters that elects each senator the delegates from the smaller towns, those with a population of from 10,000 to 15,000, are usually in the majority, and this goes far to explain why it is the political opinion of the provincial market town that is dominant in the Senate. On the whole, this means that the views of the Senate incline definitely to the Left, but not very far to the Left; the senatorial majority, therefore, has always been profoundly suspicious of any advanced social reform, or of any proposal that would make for heavy taxation. Thus the Senate might force M. Tardieu in 1930 and M. Laval in 1932 to resign because their policies inclined too much to the Right, but in 1937 it defeated M. Blum not only because of a fear for the safety of the franc, but also because of a strong hostility to the radical reform measures of the *Front Populaire*.

While it is perfectly true to say that the Senate represents the cautious liberalism of the provincial bourgeois, that is not whole truth, for the Senate is only too often out of date in its expression of that opinion: what the Senate says to-day, the provincial bourgeois may have been thinking five or six years ago, but by now he has probably changed his views. What is the reason for this lag in representation on the part of the Senate? In the first place, many of the senators have graduated from the Chamber of Deputies; they are old-school politicians, and as Senate opinion changes very slowly, these men still hold fast to the views that years ago had made them a modest success in the Lower House. But there is more in it than this: many of the senators, in all good faith, really do represent the views their constituents held a dozen years back. Senators are elected for nine years; this means that towards the end of their term of office they are still quite naturally preaching the policies that got them in eight or nine years before. And that is not the whole of the story: the senators are elected not by the general voters,

but by a college most of whose members were themselves elected three or four years earlier. Therefore if the Senate does speak with the voice of the people, it is the sort of voice that the people were using anything from six to twelve years before.

But it is extremely doubtful if the Senate does represent very accurately even the voice of the past, for the Senate is an example of extraordinarily unequal representation. It is not only that in the electoral college that chooses a senator a commune of five hundred people have one delegate, while Paris with its population of 3,000,000 has only thirty, but the department of the Seine which contains Paris and therefore includes about one-tenth of the total population of France elects only ten senators out of a total of 314; that is to say, one-tenth of the population elects less than one-thirtieth of the senators, while a provincial department with less than 100,000 inhabitants will have two senators all to itself; or to put it another way, in Paris a senator represents 300,000 people, in a rural department possibly only 50,000. This again is the reason for the preponderance in the Senate of the very cautious liberalism of the rural and provincial middle class.

All laws have to pass the Senate as well as the Chamber of Deputies, and with bills it does not like, the Senate is therefore able to achieve its ends by a policy of masterly inertia. In the endless deliberations of a Senate committee an unpleasant reform is either emasculated or forgotten. It took, for example, over four years to consider the proposal of the Chamber of Deputies to legalize the weekly holiday for workmen, and it took twelve years to pass a railwaymen's pension act.

What is the result of all this? The Prime Minister and Cabinet have had to serve two masters: their resignation can be forced upon them by the rejection of an important measure in either the Chamber of Deputies or the Senate. These two masters have not the same ideas: while the Chamber of Deputies represents very fairly the current opinion of all France, the Senate speaks largely and belatedly for the provincial middle class. Yet neither of these two bodies can control the other. The consequences are almost inevitable: political bargaining, political instability, and a visible reluctance on the part of any Cabinet Minister to pursue a strong and determined policy: his almost certain defeat if he does.

When the Senate brought about the fall of M. Blum's second Ministry on April 8, 1938, because it objected to his

social reforms and financial proposals, he expressed a good deal of popular feeling in France when he said: "You, the Senate of the Republic, do not want this government. You have not disguised the fact for the past fortnight. To-day you are going to make its life impossible. Much as you may desire a change of government, you have no right to decide it. That belongs only to the Chamber, elected by universal suffrage." The Senate might be a representative body, but with its great powers it was rapidly making representative parliamentary government in France impossible.

The third defect in the French parliamentary system—and the one that is probably the most serious of all—is the fact that the Prime Minister cannot secure a dissolution of the Chamber of Deputies in order to appeal to the country after a parliamentary defeat. The power of dissolution lies in the hands of the President, but he can exercise it only with the consent of the Senate, and President MacMahon's highly improper dissolution in 1877 aroused so much dissatisfaction that the power has never been employed since. The results of this situation are thoroughly bad, because it weakens the position of a Cabinet to an unreasonable degree and encourages irresponsible and often self-seeking opposition, not only from parliamentary opponents, but also from those deputies who were supposed to lend the Cabinet their support. They do not care whether the Cabinet falls or not; it is not going to cost them anything; they are not imperilling their seats, they will not have to run the risk of an expensive election, they do not mind whether the country agrees with them or disagrees with them; and they may get more favours out of the new Cabinet. Party discipline becomes almost impossible. That the Prime Minister is unable to threaten a dissolution of the Chamber and so an appeal to the opinion of the country is not only one of the outstanding reasons for the instability of French Ministries, but also makes possible what is equally pernicious—the great number of French political parties.

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French parties are an almost inextricable tangle to the foreigner. When, for example, the elections of 1936 were over and the members of the Chamber of Deputies began to sort themselves out, at least sixteen parties could be counted, and several new ones cropped up between 1936 and 1940. Of these sixteen, three might be classed as Conservative or Right, six

as belonging to the Centre, six as Left or inclining to the Left, and one miscellaneous group can best be described as Independent, because the political views of its members did not happen at the moment to be acceptable to any of the established parties. Of course any one of these parties can be further subdivided into groups following particular party leaders, or groups that are just a shade pinker or just a shade whiter than the accepted colour of the party line. All this in itself obviously provides a marvellous opportunity for political juggling, for not only does the Prime Minister fail to control his supporters, but the various parties cannot even control their own members by the threat of expulsion. There are so many parties that the offending deputy can quite easily join another one only a shade to the right or to the left of the party from which he has been expelled, and his constituents will hardly know the difference. Nor is this all. In the twenty years that elapsed after the end of the first World War, a period that covered five elections to the Chamber of Deputies, there was not one single party either of the Right or of the Centre that maintained a continuous existence under the same name. Sometimes one party name has succeeded to another party name with apparently no change in political policy; often the change in name has meant merely a change in membership, a compromise in order to throw out some members whose policies were not liked, or even more commonly to build up an ephemeral alliance with a neighbouring group of deputies and so to increase their bargaining power with the Cabinet.

It can of course be said that these shifting and kaleidoscopic rearrangements are the result of the innate individualism of the French voter, and to a certain degree that is true. The average Frenchman appears wholly unwilling to think of himself simply as a member of one of two groups, the Conservatives or the Radicals, the Right or the Left, those who regard progress with suspicion or those who see in progress the only hope of the state. French parties are of course roughly divided in this way, but the ordinary Frenchman has in practice shown a firm determination not to subordinate his own peculiarities of political opinion to broad fundamental principles such as these; he would prefer to look around and find a few kindred spirits, join with them so that they may form a party for themselves, and then to cooperate with other parties only when they happen to have points of common interest. To some degree, of course, all voters feel this way, though the ingrained individualism of the French people

appears to make them hold to this policy with more bitter determination than is usual in other democratic countries. Therefore it seems probable that the most important thing which prevents the same sort of multi-party system from growing up among the voters in England or in the United States has been the development of party discipline among the members of parliament. It has been much more likely that these members of parliament or of congress have imposed fairly homogeneous and powerful parties upon the voters, than that the voters in their natural political wisdom have shown any great partiality for the two-party system. The reasons for this are clear, though curiously enough the motives that lie behind them in England and in the United States are entirely different.

In England the power that the Prime Minister possesses of dissolving parliament and so calling for a new election forces the individual member or the small group of members to think very carefully before deserting the party and so defeating the Ministry; elections are dangerous, tiresome, and cost money. Consequently the Prime Minister is able to keep his majority in line, to persuade the members of his party to sink their smaller differences in the hope of remaining in power. Therefore on the other side of the House the opposition, if they are going to get anywhere at all, if they are going to overthrow their rivals at the polls, must also learn to pull together. Not only is party discipline in this way gradually evolved, but small groups soon discover that they are going to be of very little importance unless by chance the two major parties are almost equal in numbers. Consequently when a new party emerges, it is either soon absorbed or, like the English Labour Party, acquires its own discipline and increases so rapidly that it can overthrow one of the two major parties, the Liberal, and take its place, the remains of the dying party being divided between its two rivals; and so the two-party system tends to acquire permanence. Of course there are other factors that lead to the same end, but they are all subordinate in importance to the principle of discipline which holds both government and opposition parties together, because their members realize that united effort is the only way by which they have a real chance to win; this discipline results in there being laid before the country only two or at most three platforms, so that the voters really do have the parties imposed upon them.

In the United States, the same result is achieved, but for totally different reasons; there is the two-party system and party

discipline, but there is no power of dissolution in the hands of the head of the Ministry, the Members of Congress stay for their allotted term, and no one can force them to risk consulting their constituents. Party discipline is in fact very largely the result of the existence of the party machine, though of course the knowledge that unity may bring victory and that party funds and party approval are useful in elections and can be denied to possible rebels are factors that cannot be ignored. The party machine grew to power very largely because politics in the United States during the second half of the nineteenth century became a trade, not a gentleman's profession as in England; it became a trade which professional politicians were practising, not for the good of the country or of the party, but solely for the good of themselves. The rest of the nation were too busy moving towards the western frontier or making money for private profit to worry about what went on in the city hall, in the state capital, or even at Washington itself. So political bosses were born and waxed fat: they organized their local machines, found it profitable to get control of state politics and build up a machine there; and finally the national parties, because they had jobs to give away and could pass laws favouring special interests, fell in with the American way of life and were likewise mechanized. The national party, being very largely run for victory and its fruits, found that its machine, interlocking with all the lesser machines in the state and city, oiled by graft and lobbying, was a very effective tool by which to achieve its ends. Therefore the machine was in the party to stay; it is there now; and the machine demanded obedience and discipline in return for the guarantee of victory. Not only did the party leaders as a result obtain what in many cases amounted to unquestioning obedience, but they could, as an awful warning, penalize those who strayed from the party line. The Republican Party's treatment of the Progressives just before the last war is a case in point; that of Wendell Willkie at the beginning of this war is another. So in the United States, as in England, though for very different reasons, discipline can be maintained and the two-party system has been preserved.

In France there are no party machines of importance, there are no political bosses, there is no exercise of the power of dissolution on the advice of the Prime Minister, therefore there is no party discipline, there is no steady political battle in the Chamber between two lines of happy fighters. Instead there is what too often amounts to a "free for all," a tumultuous game

of grab. Moreover, cutting right across the political line between Conservative and Radical, there are in France deep religious and economic divisions that tend to disrupt any permanent party alignment, just as, at the present time, religious, racial, and economic cross-currents are playing havoc with the two-party system in the province of Quebec. In France, where there is practically no party discipline at all, these counter-political divisions add to the chaos with tragic results. Cabinet instability is chronic; during the twenty years between 1919 and 1939 France has had 41 ministries, while during this same period England had only ten, and Canada only six.

The three defects which have been described above are largely responsible for this ministerial instability in France, and therefore in these lies the secret of the failure of the parliamentary system in that country, for a failure it has been. But it has not broken beyond repair, and the changes that are necessary should suggest some of the precautions to be observed in constitution building in a new Europe.

If there is responsible government, there must be only one legislative house to which the Cabinet is responsible. If there is a second chamber, it must have no more than a delaying or suspensive power over legislation. Secondly, governments must be reasonably stable, and this can best be assured by a drastic reduction in the number of parties. For this purpose there must be party discipline: it can hardly be suggested that this should be enforced by party machines based on patronage and corruption, so the alternative, the power of dissolution in the hands of the Prime Minister, must be adopted. This disciplinary power will not inevitably succeed in keeping down the number of parties, but the odds are in its favour.

If France keeps the framework of her old parliamentary system and desires to work it efficiently, these changes will be necessary. Some other countries may want to imitate Russia, hoping thus to achieve some of her political and military success, and the Russian government, notwithstanding that the constitution of 1936 has in fact the earmarks of a totalitarian rather than a parliamentary regime. But there are sure to be some states that desire to establish responsible parliamentary government, and in that case it must be remembered that not only are political experience and political goodwill necessary, but also a sound ministerial stability which will never be found in a state that is cursed with innumerable small and squabbling parties.