

DEMOCRACY AND PARLIAMENT

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THE English-speaking peoples are commonly believed to have something like a monopoly of the instinct for self-government. Other races when they cast aside their own institutions are understood to do so usually in flattery of us, and we feel no surprise when their ventures end in failure. After all, we say, it is the genius of the race which decides these matters. Now while no one would deny that to the Anglo-Saxon representative institutions have become second nature, few authorities to-day would care to say that they are first nature. The "genius of the race" on analysis turns out to be a matter of happy chance and accident, a compound of such things as the English Channel and the sensible and selfish desire for law and order exhibited by a long-forgotten Frenchman who was once king of England—Henry II.

The long drama of English history has found room for scenes portraying every type of government, from the absolute to the democratic, and the evolution from one to another has been neither direct nor necessary. Parliament, or at least the House of Commons, arose in response to a king's shrewd guess that he was hitting on a particularly effective means of getting at his subjects' incomes, and it continued to exist because the great men of the State managed to shape it into a handy weapon for promoting their own interests. While it is usual in these days to associate parliamentary government with democratic government, it is well to remember that parliament has been the handmaiden of every form of government, and that there is no inevitable connection between it and democracy.

Since democracy is our modern fashion, we tend to believe that it has been achieved, that in fact it is the form of social philosophy towards which humanity has always been groping, and that much of the glamour of history is to be found in the stirring tales of how the forces of reaction, kings, lords and priests, in contest after contest have been routed. Or rather, we tended until yesterday to tell the tale in this way, but are perversely engaged to-day in throwing mud on our idol, if not actually breaking it. But in any case, that pleasant interpretation of history which sees freedom slowly broadening down from precedent to precedent, and which therefore opens a wider and wiser future for the race, deserves to be doubted.

One hundred and two years ago, England demanding reform of parliament was close to revolution. Parliament had got too far out of line with the current of national life. The great new industrial towns were without representatives, and many an intelligent citizen had no vote. The rising middle class demanded a share in the affairs which concerned it, and that share, by the "Great Reform Bill", it got. It did not occur to the middle class that as their employees became politically conscious, they too would demand a share. But men cannot work together without discussing their common affairs and finding a common cause; hence, when the masses of England moved away from the land and into the mill, the way was opened for democracy. England became a democracy not because of a response to agreement on first principles, but out of circumstances, and English democracy to-day does not stand in the apostolic succession of the execution of Charles I, but is a product of the Industrial Revolution. It is factory made, a manufactured article.

In America the heroic view of democracy has been erected into a sort of religion. Everyone has heard of the embattled farmers, of government for the people, by the people and of the people. Here, we say, is the distinctively American thing, the greatest of American contributions, the theory and practice of the creed that every man is as good as every other man. Certainly in the century and a half since Jefferson penned his gospel, there has never been lacking a succession of apostles to proclaim his creed. For all that, one may be allowed to doubt whether American democracy stands on a philosophic base. A modern American historian can write that "it seems probable that at least one-half the immigrants into America before the Revolution, certainly outside New England, were either indentured servants or negro slaves."¹ Indentured servants were close to being white slaves, the unfortunate and the outcast, hardly the type of material to be inspired with high-flown political ideas. The fine old New England Puritan population was probably the best of all the Anglo-Saxon stocks, but it was no more than a leaven among the masses of the other colonists, and in any case the founders of Massachusetts would turn over in their graves, if they suspected that they had founded a democracy. "Beyond question", says the author just quoted, "the leaders of the Massachusetts Bay colony desired to reproduce in America the stratified society that they had known in England, excepting the titled aristocracy which stood above them in rank."

1. C. W. Beard, *Rise of American Civilization*, New York, 1931, p. 103.

Why then did the United States become preeminently the land of democracy? Due weight must be allowed to tradition. Englishmen took out with them to America traditions of representative government, of liberty secured by law. These things, while they must be carefully distinguished from democracy, are nevertheless guarantees against the other extreme, autocracy. In addition to them, the New Englander had his militant Protestantism, with its system of independent congregations determining their affairs by vote of church members, good schools of self-government and little democracies in themselves, though exclusive in so far as the rest of the world went.

But the decisive element was to be found in the circumstances of the new country. Once settlement had drawn away from the seacoast, it plunged into the frontier regions of small farms and log houses, where every man existed on his ability to swing an axe. Where everyone swings an axe and lives in a log house, there is not much opportunity for class distinction. Whatever your former status, you have to cut your home out of the forest just as your neighbour does: you are both on equal terms: you are democrats. American democracy is forest-born.

II

Canadian life, profoundly influenced from the outset by American, is in part directly imitative of American life and in part the same as it, simply because like conditions produce like results. In no matters more than in our social and political fashions are we in the continental, rather than the national, sense Americans, not British. The whole trend of British influence on Canada has been and continues to be non-democratic, whereas the trend of American influence is democratic. The British forces which play upon us come from the upper ranges of society: they centre about officialdom, the Governor-General and his miniature court, for example. They cause us to address our judges as "My Lord". Visiting Englishmen, especially if they have titles, flutter the breasts of fashionable hostesses. English culture, broadly speaking, is aristocratic. On the other hand, American civilization comes up from below: the Americans are making their civilization as they go along: their movies and their motor-cars are for everyone. That civilization is no doubt deplorable, but no one can deny its tremendous vitality. At any rate, it is the civilization which influences the Canadian "man-in-the-street".

Canada is in some respects the resultant of these two streams of culture: we are not as democratic as the Americans, and we are

not as aristocratic as the English. But it would be a mistake to believe that democracy in Canada comes direct from the United States. It does not, but as elsewhere is a result of circumstances, in this case circumstances closely similar to those of our neighbours, pioneer experience. Social equality is the very essence of the frontier, and social equality, given representative institutions, leads to political equality. With us, there has been no question of a philosophy. There has been no struggle for a principle. Democracy has not been a great objective to whose attainment we have bent all our energies. It has simply been the necessary condition of the life of a vigorous people in a new country; in other words, it has been an accident.

It has been an accident that we have on the whole tried hard to avoid, but which, having happened, all of us now acknowledge to have been the very thing for which we had been all the time striving. A century ago nearly every important person in Canada would have held chronic drunkenness to be a more venial foible than democratic opinions. Sir Francis Bond Head could win elections on such statements as "The people of Upper Canada detest democracy: they revere their Constitutional Charter, and are consequently staunch in their allegiance to their King."¹ "The British Constitution has nothing whatever to fear from its low-bred antagonist, democracy."² He goes on to speak of "crushing democracy". In 1837 this was popular language. Why the change? We obtained responsible government, someone will say. But responsible government was self-government, not democratic government, and not a single prominent statesman, from Robert Baldwin to Sir John Macdonald, would have avowed himself a democrat. Macdonald's monument, the *British North America Act*, is no more a democratic document than is the Constitution of the United States. It is full of restriction and privilege. Consider, for example, the requirements as to property in the case of a senatorial appointment.³ As late as 1885, Macdonald was standing out for property qualifications for voters, half a century after the last of them had disappeared in the United States.

One may search the records of Canadian history in vain to find some responsible expression of opinion in favour of equality. Laurier apparently never contemplated the concept. He believed in freedom, a very different thing, and in most respects in direct opposition to democracy, for there is nothing else so tyrannous as the tyranny of the majority. Whatever political philosophizing

1. Head's *Narrative*, p. 123.

2. *ibid.*, p. 173.

3. Appointment of senators was warmly supported even by George Brown

there has been in Canada—and there has been precious little—has been in the other direction, against democracy. It is in spite of the opinions of responsible persons that democracy has come to be the political condition of the generation, and it is only since it has become so that politicians have made it into a creed and decided that it is of divine origin.

III

The truth is that in a continent like this, where there is little tradition and still less respect for what there is, political creeds or philosophies can hardly be said to exist at all. A wave of opinion rolls up out of the underlying economic environment just as a thunder storm out of the west, and it drenches everything beneath it. It subsides perhaps as quickly as it originates, and gives place to another one. Consequently, to discover the laws of political meteorology, one has to discover the conditioning fundamentals. One of these undoubtedly is a stark materialism, a materialism honestly enough come by, since practically everyone came to this continent for one purpose and one purpose only, to improve his prospects, a motive laudable enough in itself, but which when multiplied some hundred million times over is rather likely to prove boring. It has also been our fate to have been deeply affected by Puritanism, with its respect for success as the visible seal of the Almighty's approval. Between these two, Canadians have developed an instinctive philosophy which seems to consist largely in the belief in industry for its own sake—perhaps it is no accident that we have chosen, as our national emblem, the beaver, symbol of untiring and rather purposeless industry—and in the worship of success.

Another fundamental, and one proceeding from the first, is our tendency to be swayed by a crowd psychology. In pioneer days no one was different from his neighbours, and consequently the time soon came when no one dared be different. Puritanism reinforced this tendency too, with its insistence on a certain set of beliefs and a "cast-iron" way of life. The result is that we are uncritical, that we dislike criticism, dislike the analytical spirit. How popular would that man be, for example, who would dare to talk objectively about the hoary assertion that "Canada has vast natural resources"! That assertion is an article of a creed not to be questioned by the believer.

From these two fundamentals, there arises very naturally the religion of Babbitry or "boomsterism" which has been given such a warm welcome by our people. It may be doubted whether

ever in history a social hysteria has done as much harm as has the "boomster" spirit of this continent within recent years. While it becomes second nature in a country in the making to believe that material progress will go on rolling up bigger totals for ever and ever, and that as long as we are going along with sufficient noise and exuberance, we must be going in the right direction, yet this non-critical, non-analytical, intolerant and insane optimism with which we are periodically cursed is heavy with evil potentialities and must somehow or other be curbed. It is a by-product of the social democracy which lives by shibboleths and fashions, and it will not be curbed until we manage to get a compass in the form of some solid philosophy, and also some leaders to proclaim it.

When this uncritical, unanalytical mentality is carried into politics, you have the antithesis of the conditions necessary for the creation and maintenance of the ideal State, which surely must depend on an intelligent and interested citizenry, who if they cannot judge all measures must at least be able to judge men. Now, the majority of our electorate divides into two groups, one group that of party men, who get their party where they got their religion, in their cradles—we have uncomfortably many ridings in Canada where the result is always a foregone conclusion—the other consisting of persons who are either puzzled or disgusted by politics, critical of all parties and of everybody who enters public life. Unfortunately criticism from this source seldom gets any further than the utterance of some such remark as "They're all crazy", or "All the politicians are crooked". This attitude of holding oneself aloof from politics, of considering "the Government" as an entity in itself, separate from the community—quite a common attitude in Canada—is even more dangerous than pure partyism; for if it were to become general, it would mean the end of self-government and of freedom. Boss rule in certain American cities indicates the nature of its outcome.

While the party system has a useful purpose to serve in arousing interest by all the excitement of a fight, this disgust at politics manifested by so many is but one of its disservices, and there is little doubt but that by its excesses it has done much harm. We have taken our politics with the seriousness of the Scot or the pugnacity of the Irishman, not with the tolerance of the Englishman, and consequently we have come to value party for its own sake. Many people see some final end in a party, just as they would in a religion. It may be admitted that the Catholic or the Baptist or any other Church is an agency of Divine purpose, but it is hard to believe that the Conservative or the Liberal party

is. Party claims the loyalty that the State should have. Our party lines are too rigid. Party discipline is too good. Members do not cross the floor often enough. In a country like this, with its uncritical acceptance of "slogans", with the absence of any considerable body of informed and intelligent opinion, with minor or ephemeral differences of principle between the chief parties, there is peculiar danger of party degenerating into faction. The danger is accentuated by the extreme mobility of our people, so many of whom regard the community in which they are living as representing but a transient phase of their existence, and expect sooner or later to move on. While the number of people who feel that they are in and of their community "for keeps", and of those who are sufficiently interested and intelligent to make decisions for themselves, is increasing, it is still far too small, and even the intelligent vote is sectional rather than national.

Faction is the bane of democracies and there is an intimate relationship among faction, democracy and dictatorship. Democracy does not and cannot mean the rule of the people. At best it means the choice of rulers. For us as a people, our participation in government is limited to marking a cross on a ballot once in four years. The people cannot make a decision. It can do one of two things, answer "yes" or "no" to a question asked of it. Some one, or some few, must guide its destinies. Since all beneath the few are equal, or supposedly equal, there is little barrier to the will of the one or of the few who represent all, and consequently pure democracies sometimes pass over into pure autocracies. France under Napoleon forms the classic example. Most despotisms are initially based on popularity.

As time goes on in an absolutist State, one of two things happens: abuses accumulate until there is an explosion; or, little by little, groups of men succeed in wresting privileges for themselves. These privileged groups become an aristocracy and gradually gain control. The two tendencies are nicely illustrated by the history of France from Richelieu to the Revolution, and by that of England from the Tudors to the Hanoverians.

In Canada we are living under a mixed régime. We think we are a pure democracy, but we are not. In a pure democracy, there would be no bulwark whatever against the will of the majority. Fortunately we have bulwarks. We may be democrats, but we are also British subjects, and British subjects have in the course of centuries won from the Crown certain rights, the "rights of Englishmen", the "rights of the subject", of which they cannot very easily be deprived. British law does not proclaim that "All

men are born free and equal", but it does insist that every man is entitled to a fair trial, that he must not be kept in prison without being brought to trial, that officials have no rights which ordinary citizens do not have. Yet none of these rights has been obtained by "the people" as such, but each of them by a small class tenaciously pursuing its own interests; in other words, by an aristocracy, if we use that word in the sense of a group having special power and privilege. It is historical accident that that aristocracy was of such a nature as to be willing to share its privileges with the nation at large. The argument may be put thus: democracy stands for equality, aristocracy for freedom. Is there danger that we in Canada may slip from democracy to some form of dictatorship (either of the Right or of the Left) since we have but a small aristocratic element in the State and one which does not share the political traditions of British aristocracy, and have a slow and painful climb back to freedom?

IV

There is a very easy theory, derived from the triumphs of the nineteenth century, to the effect that as wealth and education increase, political consciousness broadens, class after class is drawn into the conduct of affairs, and thus freedom and the right conduct of government—usually termed "democracy"—become automatic by-products of the machine of economic progress. The theory is too easy. The theory of eternal and inevitable progress is too easy. History, if it shows anything, surely shows just the opposite, that the widening of the area of political consciousness and the more general distribution of wealth, while it may achieve democracy, does not prevent set-backs to it. No nation, however enlightened, has long preferred disorder to peace and strong government; for example, the easy success of Louis Napoleon in 1852 in establishing autocracy in France, or Mussolini and Hitler to-day. Democracy, in fact, evaporates rather readily.

While nothing dramatic of the sort is likely to happen in Canada, one cannot be at all sure that the transition from democracy to absolutism will not take place. One cannot be unduly optimistic as to the future of our "rights of the subject", of what we like to call "British freedom" (though it is distinctly different from the "British freedom" of the mother country). You are free enough if you keep to the prescribed limits; but overstep those limits a little, and you find yourself in unpleasant contact with the power of the State. Thus while internally our press is free, there is a rigorous censorship of printed materials coming from abroad. The

right of free speech has of late been considerably abridged, and there are now types of political belief adherence to which is a criminal act, just like heresy in the Middle Ages. For non-citizens, the Immigration Act provides almost a complete denial of traditional British justice, and no Star Chamber ever cut across tradition more completely than it does. As for parliament, it has made a greater surrender of its powers to the executive than has been made by a British House since the reign of Henry VIII. Of course amidst all this, no one concerned is fool enough to admit that the old principles have been impugned, but no such one ever is. The tack to take is to continue to pay lip-service to the old principles while whittling them away. Proceed against the free speech and fair trial of unpopular foreigners first. Consolidate that position before you go on to the next. Democracy will welcome your measures because those at whose expense they are taken will necessarily be a minority; it will welcome strong leadership in any direction, whether to the Right or to the Left; it will have little interest in the abstraction "freedom".

Democracy will have interest in one abstraction only, that in it resides power, and in believing in this abstraction it will be mistaken; for whatever the form in which society and government are cast, whether fascist, socialistic, or parliamentary, the truth, however unpalatable it may be, is that political power will always reside in the hands of the few, and generally it will reside in the same hands as does economic power. And in nearly all western countries, especially in Canada, economic power, the control of wealth, passes into fewer hands each year. To the people is left the more or less empty parade of voting, to a handful of bankers and company directors goes the privilege of controlling the State in their own interests. One is sometimes driven to think that it would be better, as it would be franker, to make up the Dominion Cabinet, not of straw men, but from a selection of such personages as the Presidents of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the Bank of Montreal, the Dominion Textile Company, the Steel Company of Canada and so on. To round it out, there might be included the heads of the Roman Catholic hierarchy and the Grand Master of the Orange Order! We would then know where we stood, and such a Cabinet could not take refuge behind a fringe of political skirmishers.

It might give us good government, too. If you gave them open power, you might be able to divert to the public good the masterful instincts that at present often turn our big capitalists into predatory animals. In some way or other we have got to

develop a tradition of public responsibility, and one way of doing that would seem to be to take the men who have the largest stake in the country and tame them. They are in virtual control now. A shift to the Socialist Left would probably put them into open control, for the missionaries of that creed would soon be displaced by the men of action, that is, by the equivalent of our present capitalist class.

They handle these problems better in England. They take men who in Canada would be ravening tigers, so far as the general interests are concerned, and by the simple process of making them peers give them some sense of public responsibility. The policies which in Canada they would seek to make realities by subterranean means they in England proclaim from the public platform: willy-nilly they get shoved into public life, and more or less tamed into useful citizens. In Canada, they tend to be merely irresponsible millionaires, working off their energies by preying on the vitals of the State.

If our Cabinet Ministers sometimes consist of straw men, what are we to think of the private member? Consider how our political destinies are settled. An election is announced and, from some mysterious source, two men appear in each riding to court the suffrages of The People. Where have they come from? They have most likely been put forward by the party machines. How have they got their nominations? By an infinitude of intricate, subtle and no doubt often corrupt devices. If the riding is an easy one, nomination may be as good as election. "The People" in such a case may well be the half-dozen men who have decided to "bring out" Mr. So-and-so. If a party nominating convention is held, it is attended by a small number of people, and even in case of a nominating convention the candidate may be virtually decided upon before the convention meets.

In close ridings, there will be a genuine fight, but the voter nevertheless is forced to decide between two men for neither of whom, as a man, he may wish to vote. Then when the election is over, we find that we have elected, not men, but rubber stamps, which will be applied to whatever measures the Ministry of the day decides upon:

"When in that House M.P.'s divide
If they've a brain and cerebellum too,
They've got to leave that brain outside
And vote just as their leaders tell 'em to".

A system of politics which is worked by unseen forces and in which the average citizen has next to no influence may be all very well, but it will not do to call it democracy, for it is not democracy.

What we really do in an election is to put the heads of a party into office, and if the head of the heads, the prime minister, happens to be a forceful personality, what we do in effect is to elect a dictator. A dictatorship, or rather one-man rule, according to Aristotle, is the ideal form of government, but it is not the easiest thing in the world to find a dictator. Unfortunately you do not get a Caesar every day in the week. You are more likely to get a George III.

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Parliament has had a long and varied history, it has seen many forms of government come and go, and it has never in any age been the expression of any particular form of social philosophy. It is simply a device for getting the business of the nation done. It may be incompetent, members may be sheep, it may at times be almost a laughing-stock. But it is a machine, a very old and, on the whole, a dependable machine. And it is a safety valve. An election clears the air. A full dress debate clears the air. If the machine creaks a bit in one generation, it will recover itself in the next. The important thing is to make sure that it does not make such a complete surrender of its power to an executive of either Right or Left that it can be prevented from carrying on. It is in a sense luxury, for strong government must always be impatient of it, this eternal talking machine, but its talk and its inefficiency are the price to be paid for freedom, which itself in these strenuous times is perhaps a luxury, certainly something which either political extreme would soon take away from us, but a luxury which a good many of us still think we can afford, and for which we are willing to forgo even economic Utopias. To secure us freedom, the parliamentary machine must go on, for by it alone can governments be kept in the middle of the road. But do not expect too much from it, for parliamentary institutions are not contrivances for bringing about the millennium, but devices for the application of the necessary grease at the points of friction in the machine of State.