

THE MONARCHY IN SOCIETY

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COLLECTORS of constitutional crises tend to specialize in the legal and technical aspects of political troubles, thus underemphasizing the social nature of governmental institutions. This bias is particularly misleading when the social side of an institution is of primary importance, as with constitutional monarchs and those who stand in their place throughout the British Commonwealth. Kings and governors have ceremonial and social—or perhaps sociable—duties whose significance is as great as it is intangible, and it is surprising that political scientists have devoted so much less attention to royal and vice-royal breaches of decorum than they have to mere fractures of precedent in the legal sense.

The interest that a titular head of a government may have in social affairs must be distinguished from his role in society. A monarch, or his parallel, may take a keen interest in social legislation, and that very interest may lead one faction or another to brand him as "anti-social." The Lieutenant-Governor of Prince Edward Island who in 1945 vetoed a temperance bill, apparently on moral grounds, seems to have made few friends in official circles by the action, although it was undeniably a social one. Queen Victoria's attitude towards another social problem, female suffrage, was at least as much anti-social as not, but there is little to show that her attitude affected her place in society. "The Queen," she wrote, "is most anxious to enlist every one who can speak or write to join in checking this mad, wicked folly of 'Women's Rights' with all its attendant horrors." Again, Victoria's position in society was rather different from what might be suspected from a comment she made to the Marquis of Salisbury about the proposed financing of the Boer War. "I sincerely hope," she said in a message she considered important enough to send in a cypher telegram, "that the increased taxation, necessary to meet the expenses of the war, will not fall upon the working classes; but I fear they will be most affected by the extra sixpence on beer."

While a monarch's attitude to social affairs can to a degree be measured by the study of such activities as the sending of telegrams, his position in society must be assessed in more circuitous and less reliable ways. Few monarchs have breathed more strongly the rarefied air of the top social stratum than did

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Victoria; yet an English peer, discussing society's leaders with a contemporary, once disposed of a comment to the effect that the leaders were not exactly *persona grata* with the Queen with a pained "The Queen! The Queen was *never* in society!" Yet while society's chief haunts may have been closed to Her Majesty, her prolonged and self-imposed seclusion after the death of the Prince Consort left its mark on the community just the same. "It was observed," Strachey has written, "that the Queen's protracted privacy not only cast a gloom over high society, not only deprived the populace of its pageantry, but also exercised a highly deleterious effect upon the dressmaking, millinery, and hosiery trades. This latter consideration carried great weight."

The quotations indicate that while Victoria's position in society may have been unknown, it was nevertheless important. Setting aside as irrelevant the technical question of exactly how, if at all, Governors General and Lieutenant-Governors represent the King, the Crown, the government, or anything else, it may be said that the social position of the head of the state becomes increasingly indistinct the further down the monarchical scale one goes. Leading members of the royal family may occasionally arouse comment by wearing dresses disapproved of by journalists, smoking in public, and going off to shoot grouse while potential heirs to the throne are born; but dissatisfaction with the occupants of Buckingham Palace has never gone so far as to produce the notion that the Kingship should henceforth be open only to native stay-at-home Londoners of simple habits. The opposite is true of Governors General, every one of whom holds sway in a country where a group would prefer the King to be represented by a native of the Dominion concerned, the implication being that the role of the monarchy in Dominion society, while vague, is such that all the King's compatriots are automatically disqualified for the job. And as for Lieutenant-Governors: these poor wights must not only maintain themselves largely at their own expense in some areas, but also tolerate frequent suggestions that their post be abolished altogether.

The exact position of the Lieutenant-Governor is indeed a puzzle of considerable interest. Like their counterparts so far above them, Lieutenant-Governors have certain jobs connected with the signing of bills and the opening and proroguing of legislatures, and presumably certain obligations in regard to public appearances and entertainment. A public appearance may itself be a form of entertainment, for responsible biographers of Victoria have recorded ere this the unrest that resulted from her

habit of spending most of the year out of town, which, we are informed, "seriously incommoded the work of the Ministers." When, after her husband's death, she appeared about to go into permanent mourning, London's leading newspaper devoted so much energy to expressing its disapproval that she wrote what is the only known instance of a letter from a reigning monarch to the editor of *The Times*. "The Queen," she said, "heartily appreciates the desire of her subjects to see her, and whatever she can do to gratify them in this loyal and affectionate wish, she will do." That was in April of 1864; in December of the same year, when her attempts to gratify her people were still falling short, she wrote to Earl Russell that she "has no wish to shut herself up from her loyal people, and has and will at any time seize any occasion which might offer to appear amongst them (painful as it ever is now)."

No Lieutenant-Governor, so far as I know, has ever had to face dilemmas such as these of Queen Victoria. Nevertheless, even Lieutenant-Governors are sometimes forced to choose between their public and private interests, and since they themselves may supply from their private means much of the wherewithal for their public duties, the dice are on occasion perhaps rather heavily loaded. The government of British Columbia was approached in 1948 by persons interested in having the Lieutenant-Governor's official residence, Government House, made available for entertaining visitors from the American Bar Association. The government passed the request on to the Lieutenant Governor, who refused it and went on a trip to Britain. The Provincial Secretary's office, according to the press, then requisitioned the Legislative Buildings for the reception, and the distinguished tone of the gathering was lowered by the fact that, because of a shortage of crockery, paper cups had to be used by the thousand guests. The Lieutenant-Governor then came in for considerable criticism from various people, all of whom seemed to assume that since he was only a squarehead he ought at least to have been a useful one and allowed the hordes of visiting lawyers to use his home and, presumably, his cups. Government House, it was suggested, might be of greater benefit if converted into a home for the aged.

Spokesmen for the Lieutenant-Governor raised the issue of whether the Lieutenant-Governor of a province was entitled to privacy in his own home. "Previous Lieutenant-Governors," was pointed out, "have had a home either in Victoria or Vancouver. The present incumbent has no home except Govern-

ment House, and, consequently, feels he is entitled to privacy." This argument was backed editorially by the influential Vancouver *Sun*, which objected to having Government House turned into a "catering centre for visiting conventions." "Once that sort of thing starts," said the *Sun's* editorial writer, "it is hard to stop. His Honor would be holding open house for every organization with a yen for vice-regal recognition—or without the funds to hire a suite in the Empress Hotel. The residence of the King's representative in British Columbia is not constitutionally required to become an adjunct of the Victoria and Island Publicity Bureau." The *Victoria Times* referred to the increasing difficulty encountered by British Columbia governments in finding "public-minded citizens able and willing to accept the financial and other responsibilities" the Lieutenant-Governorship entails. Some time later, a Cabinet member offered as his opinion that "the Lieutenant-Governor pays the shot and if he does not want to entertain that is his privilege. I don't know whether the Lieutenant-Governor should be a social leader of Victoria or not. Personally . . . I don't waste time on that sort of thing."

This minor crisis in the British Columbia Lieutenant-Governorship inevitably revived insistent questions about what Lieutenant-Governors were for anyway, and whether they did anything at all that could be done just as well by somebody else. A by-product of the affair was the revelation of the weakness of a provincial government in this sort of argument over the Lieutenant-Governorship. As an appointee of the Ottawa government, the Lieutenant-Governor is paid from the federal treasury; his office, according to the British North America Act, is beyond the reach of the provincial government; he pays part and perhaps all of his entertainment expenses. No matter how he interprets his functions, a provincial government's tactical position in dealing with him can hardly be said to be strong. The British Columbia Cabinet minister who did not "waste time on that sort of thing" may have been declaring a point of high policy.

The same Government House found itself involved in another crisis in 1949, when an attempt was made by the Lieutenant Governor's lady to assume a position of positive leadership in society. The exact details of the 1949 rumpus are not clear, but a leading newspaper described it in these words: "Legislators' wives are gossiping here about the incident at a Government House luncheon last week when they were verbally 'slapped'

by the Lieutenant-Governor's wife for their lack of courtesy." (It appears that some of the guests were delinquent in replying to invitations to the luncheon, and the staff of Government House had had to telephone some of them to ascertain if they were planning to attend.) At the luncheon, the governor's lady "gathered her guests in the drawing room on arrival and explained to them that as wives of members they should observe the niceties of such things. To cap it all, the wife of an interior member arrived late—something that is definitely 'not done' for such a function—and (the Lieutenant-Governor's wife) took her aside and lectured her on the necessity of getting there on time. The wife pretty bluntly said she had been helping her husband prepare his speech, which, to her, was the important thing at the moment." "There was," the *Vancouver Sun* recorded laconically, "a subdued air about the luncheon."

The subdued air rapidly dissolved when another journal's report of the same luncheon reached the public. The second journal, whose story was written by either an imaginative or extremely well-informed correspondent, implied that some of the luncheon guests had fortified themselves before hand, with the result that whatever went on at the luncheon perhaps owed something to artificial stimulation. The members of the Legislative Assembly heatedly criticized the report, and some were all for having the writer brought to the Bar of the House that an apology might be extracted from him. "There is a shadow cast upon every one of our wives," one member was quoted as saying, adding that his own wife had not been at the luncheon. Another member made clear that a dinner being given to the Lieutenant-Governor's lady by members' wives had been planned well before the luncheon and was not being offered as an olivebranch. The *Vancouver Sun* reported that "several members said the article reflects on all womanhood in this province by implying that wives of M.L.A.'s do not know how to handle their drinks." It is, to be sure, a moot point whether that implication is a greater or less reflection on the members' wives than its contrary.

Now what are we to conclude if, granting that it is the place of the titular head of the government to offer leadership in social affairs, so harmless an occurrence as a few words on etiquette from a Lieutenant-Governor's lady produces a result such as has been outlined above. One obvious conclusion pertains to the importance of gossip in a social affair, for while in an ordinary constitutional crisis certain demonstrable facts and precedents

can usually be produced, in social crises one can at best try only to sort out the truth from an accumulation of charges and counter-charges. The importance of gossip in high politics can hardly be overestimated, and Queen Victoria herself was not above turning it to her own use. When, two years after her husband's death, the Queen's grief was still too great to allow her to stand the strain of public appearances, she obtained the advice of three doctors to defend her seclusion on grounds of health, and had Sir Charles Phipps write these words to Palmerston in her name: "It would probably be well that it should become generally known that Her Majesty is acting under medical advice. But this is a matter of great delicacy, because it is of importance not to cause any alarm. Probably the mere promulgation in Society, in ordinary conversation, of the facts as they are, might be the easiest and safest way of allowing them to become public." Considered purely as a technique, it is to be noted that in this instance gossip was a singular failure, for public clamour over the Queen's retirement was greater after Phipp's letter than before. It may be that, lacking the assistance of modern newspapers, the channels of communication between *Society* and society were faulty.

During the 1949 luncheon crisis in British Columbia, a member of the Legislative Assembly remarked sagely: "This is the sort of thing that tends to bring our established institutions into disrepute." And guiltless as everybody concerned may have been in 1948 and 1949, it would be difficult to argue that, whatever happened, the prestige of the office of Lieutenant-Governor was enhanced. The curious thing is that of all the protagonists the inhabitants of Government House were perhaps the most innocent, yet the office of Lieutenant-Governor, in the long run, seems to have sustained the most serious damage. A comment of Frank Hardie's on Queen Victoria is pertinent: "Probably the Queen never understood the immense importance of popularity for the monarch as a means of preserving the strength of the monarchy." For Lieutenant-Governors, popularity bids fair to depend on abstention from almost any activity that might distinguish a governor from other citizens of his province. An overt move of any kind in any direction will be regarded by somebody of importance as a mistake, and it is possible that some day a governor will take one of his duties so seriously that not even the fact that he pays his own expenses will save him.