

# THE CULT OF MEDIOCRITY IN CANADA

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A FEW months ago a Canadian newspaper stated that England would shortly abandon Free Trade.<sup>1</sup> This was not a piece of European news, of course. The author of the paragraph, in statements that followed, showed that he knew nothing of the temper of the British people, and that his opinion was baseless. It was merely a typical case of foreclosing discussion on a Canadian topic by making a groundless assertion about affairs outside. Mention such an incident as this to thoughtful men among us, and they reply: "Oh, well, the newspapers of course! We shall have the truth in time." The difficulty is that discussion which consists of mere *ex parte* statement is not confined to our newspapers. In election time, the only time when we seem to be awake to politics, criticism and rational statement are hardly expected, and are never heard. Between elections political talk is pretty well confined to Ottawa; and any one who goes there to listen to it, or who attempts to follow it in *Hansard*, may well be dismayed. Last winter, when the reparations question was projected into the Ottawa debates, not more than a handful of members showed any knowledge of the matter. These men were reviled and jeered at in the House, and not one newspaper in Canada reported their remarks.

"But," our thoughtful friends object again: "Politics are not the only question, nor are newspapers and the political platform the only media of debate. There is art, and science, the whole realm of thought. Consider how the truth has prevailed there. Twenty years ago, from Cowards' Castle, in a stifled atmosphere, we were forbidden to think. What has happened? The Churches have not reformed, certainly, but the world has moved on, and the Churches have been to a great extent deserted. It will be so with the artificialities of our political life. The world will move on, through catastrophes we may be sure, and leave them behind. This can be seen already with regard to our newspapers. Their headlines and page advertisements are unheeded. The evil is working its own cure."

But what a comment on the life of a country that prides itself on its freedom, its independence, its education! To find the truth

1. This article was written and sent to me, precisely as it is printed, prior to the British elections.—EDITOR.

so late, in spite of ourselves, to come to it wearily, in old age, with souls so blunted that we scarcely can discern its lineaments, and house with it suspiciously to the last, our ancient enemy, our untried friend! And so many of us never to find it at all! *Magna est veritas et praevalabit.*

When all its work is done, the lie shall rot;  
The truth is great and shall prevail  
When none cares whether it prevail or not!

An amusing, rather than a mischievous, instance of our lack of balance and judgment is the ovation which we gave last autumn to a discredited politician. Some might think this merely an example of the sway newspapers have over us. Naturally the newspapers which had Mr. Lloyd George's wares to sell proclaimed the advent of a prophet. Still, it is not so long since others of our papers announced how they had been left high and dry by Mr. Lloyd George's engagements. Yet, when he came here, one heard no protest. In England the rabble of unthinking voters took Mr. Lloyd George's promise to "hang the Kaiser," and "make Germany pay" at its face value. The same rabble could not be deceived again. Our rabble showed itself not yet disillusioned. Crowds welcomed him everywhere. The Churches took him to their bosom. Club executives spent days and nights arranging meetings for him. Our universities called special convocations to grant him degrees. When it was all over, and the public had harvested a few stale commonplaces, our newspaper editors and our newspaper correspondents in England once more hailed this discredited politician as a present and future force in the affairs of Europe. In Europe the lie rots much faster than this.

A book which one would like to see read and pondered in this country appeared in Paris in 1910, "Le Culte de l'Incompétence," by Emile Faguet. It is not a book of the first rank. It lacks the philosophic breadth and depth of Montesquieu, whom it so often quotes. In one place it speaks in admiration of Aristotle collecting *en naturaliste* scores of specimens of States in order to generalize on principles of government. One misses in Faguet himself indications of having studied modern systems of popular government other than the French. The French system, however, one feels, Faguet has studied to some purpose; if his mood is that of the man of letters outraged by the banality of most of his fellow-citizens, and if his method or argument is too logical ever to fit politics and affairs (only Englishmen by the way seem to understand that

profound remark of Aristotle's that politics lacks the exactness of other sciences) still, Faguet's indictment of modern democracy is well worth consideration. His mind is one of great cultivation, his criticisms are acute, and it is always on the most important phases of the question that he dwells. It is no accident, for example, that with quite another approach he comes finally to the same analysis of French society as we find in *L'Ile des Pingouins*, (which appeared about the same time)—its disintegration in class hatred. But it is with our own "Cult of Mediocrity" that we are concerned. In political discussion, in political administration and appointments, in management of State enterprises, to some extent in legal procedure, Faguet's book is a pretty good mirror of ourselves. In educational standards we are of course below anything Faguet had dreamed of; but it is our worship of mediocrity there also that has been our undoing. Just recently an English scholar who had been visiting us let fall the remark that universities on this side the water seemed to him to pay an extraordinary amount of attention to the average student. A Canadian school which I attended had for motto *Palnam qui meruit ferat*, which some of us used to translate "The Devil take the Hindmost." But, however translated, the motto is *not* the spirit of our education. In our schools the word dunce is never heard, just as our newspapers never call a public man a fool. We now almost believe that there are no dunces or fools among us.

Does democracy deliberately, and of necessity, set out to cultivate the average? That is a question well worth asking ourselves. Cultivate the average, and the average must fall. Now, in Canada our average is falling. There is only one newspaper left in Canada of the type which was so common a quarter of a century ago—a type of newspaper which addressed itself to educated readers. Our average of political discussion, both in the House of Commons and out of it, has fallen. The generation which preceded ours would discuss principles of government, as principles. I do not mean that they were more abstract in their discussion; I mean that they were less mercenary,—they discussed the merits of the question. Take the matter of Free Trade, for example, with which I began. It was a question which came to life in our last Canadian election. I read many of the speeches delivered by what we call our political leaders; I listened to many speeches. Not once did I hear or read an allusion to what trained economists have said on the point; allusions to history, even to Canadian history, were made only to draw unfair inferences.<sup>1</sup> Even in Western Canada, where the Progressives began their campaign with a manifesto

<sup>1</sup> More recently Mr. A. R. MacMaster, M. P., has been delivering addresses on this subject, which even his opponents, I think, would call models of argument.

containing sound economic and historic argument, those in favour of Free Trade limited themselves to local and temporary considerations, and so weakened themselves by the suspicion of selfishness. As to those who spoke for the tariff, their utterances were interesting chiefly to the student of history as exemplifying the rule that tariffs corrupt politics. The hustings delivered itself to the rabble. Neither side required thought or decency from the other. I have no doubt that this was often the case formerly. But there are extant speeches of an earlier period which amply demonstrate that our politicians once spoke to the educated among their audiences, and were concerned with their opinion more than with any other. As to our schools, it is only the blind who will not see how the average has fallen there. In many respects we have Americanized our system, which is only another way of saying that we have gone to the devil. But the truth more generally is that we have lost the interest, which so characterized the pioneers of our country, in schools and learning.

To return to our self-catechism—Does democracy hate and fear superior intelligence, superior ability, superior morality? Does it deny the existence of the perfect, and the difference between black and white? Does it refuse to bestow those so often salutary titles: dunce, fool, scoundrel? Does democracy say: "Evil be thou my good, Dulness be thou my delight"? Does it deny Law, History, Experience, and shape itself to the convenience of the moment? Does it necessarily renounce dignity and reverence? Is democracy, in short, merely the doctrine of *Egalité*, as Faguet says it is, with the implication further, upon which he insists, that with a democratic government we can have no standards of excellence in the intellectual, the moral, the artistic? Is the essence of democracy the worship of mediocrity, the negation of honour and of the beautiful?

To many these questions may seem idle—mere academic vapouring. Others, who hardly understand their implication, will rejoice in the questions being put, and shout an eager affirmative to every one. For we have among us a vociferous class, the supporters not of tradition but of privilege, privilege in many cases so recently won as to sit awkwardly on the wearers, who still imagine that they are Tories and aristocrats, as Disraeli came to imagine that he spoke for the old English nobility. These men understand neither democracy nor any other form of government; but sitting on their money-bags, and their contracts, their tariffs and monopolies, they fear and dread a real discussion of public affairs, and should any one have the temerity—despite their precautions—to begin

such a discussion, they call him a socialist, a revolutionary, a dangerous man. To others again these questions may seem to be just a little beside the mark. They may object that I began by complaining of our slackness of criticism, our toleration of untruth and humbug, and then turned aside to wish that we might study a French indictment of democracy (which I admitted not to be very profound or true) merely because it partly suited our case. They will protest that I have not said whether I think we have a democracy in Canada, in the first place, nor whether I think that to call our system democratic would be to condemn it. To these more discerning readers I wish now to address myself.

At the risk of making superfluous remarks, I revert for a moment to the Greek word, and the Greek idea, democracy. Although we generally think of them as a democratic race, the Greeks themselves in various places knew other forms of government, and Greek thinkers, even those who thought democracy the best form of government, did not consider it such for all circumstances. In the first place they thought that free government of any kind, whether aristocratic or democratic, was possible only where all the citizens of the State were imbued with respect for law; and by law they meant not a body of statutes made overnight, or at random, not statutes at all as we moderns—especially those of us who live in new countries—conceive them. By law they meant tradition if you will, but living tradition. They did not mean tradition in the Canadian lawyer's sense. At the same time, for them law meant a coherence with the past to which the ordinary citizen of this country can have no analogy. With the individual it was a matter of conscience, whose dictates were self-imposed. The Greeks in these free States might have said they lived by law, acting the law they lived by, without fear. But it was a conscience in which the whole experience of the race mingled, and was felt to mingle. The dual aspect of the idea, in the Greek conception, was most important; for if the individual in a matter of conscience was aware of himself as a citizen, as a member of a community, dead, living, and yet to be born, the problems of citizenship and government were enormously simplified.

Now law, in this sense, is a matter much more of character than of intelligence, and there came a time when war sapped the Greek character. The stages of this development are interesting. There is nothing more masterly in Thucydides than his description of how the war in which he fought engendered faction, or as we should say, class-hatred, in the Greek City-States. Just as we demanded of Austria and Germany a

political revolution in our terms of peace, so did the Greek conquerors in many cases set oligarchs against democrats, and *vice-versa*, in the defeated State, and set up one or the other party with financial and military aid. But this effect was trifling in comparison with the violent habits of mind which war produced. In private actions and in domestic politics, there was a loosening of restraint. Even before great military disasters were suffered, before hunger and plague began, private and political feuds reached an unknown pitch. Then the night of defeat, famine and pestilence settled down on conquerors and conquered alike, and in the society that emerged the finest element in the Greek character was absent. Menander was still to adorn the stage; Demosthenes was still to win the admiration and pluck the heart-strings of perhaps the most enlightened audience there has ever been; Plato and Aristotle were to carry Greek intelligence to its furthest bound. But law was no more. Lysias describes how the oligarchs pillaged the State and its members when they had the upper hand; Plato and Aristotle describe the selfishness of the mob. That public and private conscience which had made the ideal Greek State a community, a government of free men who remembered that the governed were also free men, and that no public or private action should infringe this freedom,—this was Aristotle's desideratum for a reform of Greek politics, and he never tired of pointing out that the basis of it was an *ethos*, a character slowly produced by education and culture.

It is wise in citing the political dicta of the Greek thinkers to recall the frame of things in which their laws were formulated, and to make sure that our translations of their words are fully understood. No one can understand "democracy" or "free government" in the Greek sense, unless he remembers that their States had slavery for basis, that in the Greek view a slave was a tool, a means to an end. No citizen, in the Greek view, should ever be used as a means; he was an end in himself. But the slaves were not citizens. Further, no one can understand what the Greeks meant by democracy, or what they meant by government, unless he understands law in its connection with *ethos*. With these provisos it is quite legitimate to apply Greek political aphorisms, as Faguet does, to modern society. The Greeks undoubtedly did formulate political principles of universal application—despite what sciolists like Professor James Harvey Robinson<sup>1</sup> may say. Faguet explains very lucidly the difference between Greek law, and what we moderns usually mean by the word—a code of statutes. Though he is not a great political thinker, and though he limits

1 His book, *Mind in the Making*, is a good example of what may be expected wherever classics and history are taught as they are taught in American colleges.

himself to a criticism of French society, he does go to the root of the matter in much that he says of the vices to which democracy is prone. It is because he is dealing with a modern democratic society, whose institutions are not far removed from our own, as the Greek institutions might be thought to be, that one would wish to see him generally read in this country. Of course the general reader should remember that French society is an ancient one compared with ours, that it is incomparably more homogeneous, very much more enlightened, and so forth. That Faguet states himself without much qualification, and in an outraged mood, will not hurt us. We are wont to take any qualification in a criticism of ourselves as applying precisely to our case. In many of Faguet's pages we shall not find a rathole for escape.

Let us turn once again to our own form of government. If Aristotle had, to employ Faguet's figure, bagged our government as one of his specimens, he would have thought it interesting, we may be sure, and remarkable. His first remark might have been that we had granted citizenship to our slaves and metics, and he would certainly have been shocked at our levity in attempting to increase the number of our slave-citizens, and our metic-citizens, annually. He would then go on to observe that although we had made them citizens we still treated these slaves and metics as means, and not as ends, and that we even meted the same treatment to citizens who had never been slaves, but who had been born of free parents. He would say that in a State where the masses were so numerous, even if they were not so often treated as slaves, there was grave danger of instability. He would say that from the continual injection of slaves and metics into our society, it had become wholly *banausic*. He would say further that our government was "mixed," for that, although many of our forms were the "extreme of democracy" and even beyond any democracy he had ever seen, these forms were corrupted by the wealth of "the few." Finally, if he found it worth while analysing our case so far, he would say that we were not a community, that no real community of interest held us together; that our slave citizens were often lawless and violent, that "the few" had decrees passed to suit themselves, and treated free-born citizens as their own property; and that this lack of common interest arose from our having no true conception of law, and from our having no common national character, such as, in a good State, is slowly acquired by education and culture.

Comparisons not so remote may be easier for the ordinary reader. But the remote comparison occasionally helps one to see

the true nature of the thing before one's eyes. We rarely compare ourselves with anything but the United States, and every Canadian school teacher is glib with the remark that our Fathers of Confederation took the American constitution for model, but avoided its defects. We never admit that we have done anything more foolishly than the Americans. But the American government at no period has played so fast and loose with the growth of a national character, by swamping the country with immigrant hordes, as we have done. The economic self-sufficiency of the United States has been a great antidote to the poison of its tariffs. We, with the most artificial geography a State has ever had, have drugged whole portions of our community into economic coma. Is the trade of any part of the United States diverted into such unreal channels as is that of our Maritime Provinces? But the American comparison will not take us very far. To realize our dangerous plight we must know more history than we can learn from this continent, and we must study the political philosophers with a little less self-satisfaction. We must try to get below the forms of our political system, and learn how we are really governed. We must keep our eyes open to what is really going on. We must realize, for instance, that in the short space of twenty years we absolutely changed the population of our large cities—Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg. We say complacently that these cities have grown. We must realize, for instance, that our tariffs have directly resulted in Americans owning a very large share of our industries. We call this a "national policy". When we talk of "our education", we should remember what a very large population of our citizens have never been in our schools, and how large a proportion of the pupils of our schools are spending their adult lives elsewhere.

To return once again to our questions:—It is only against a decadent democracy that the vices mentioned by Faguet can be charged. Montesquieu said that every form of government had its principle, and that every form of government decayed either by abandoning its principle or by pursuing it to excess. Most moderns would say that the principle of democracy is freedom, and that when democracy decays this gives way to licence and violence on the part of the mob. Aristotle in discussing his ideal State of free men (not democracy strictly) laid it down that if a citizen of surpassing wisdom and virtue were to be found, he should be made a life-long King. Now, Athenian democracy actually did this in the case of Pericles. As soon as a democracy refuses or neglects to accept good guidance, as soon as it can be stampeded by cries of hate and foolish catchwords, we may call it decadent.



Its moral sense, even more perceptibly than its political sense, will then grow blunt. But in time political sense too will desert it; the cry of "égalité" will be raised, and the worship of mediocrity become an avowed principle.

The student of history and politics is obliged to think it an odd thing that we should give the title democracy to our Canadian system. Of course one is not so stupid as to fail to see the origin of the anomaly. Most of our British ancestry grew up under a democratic system; the American Revolution caused Britain to grant us a more liberal self-government than existed at home; the French-Canadians, a minority, eagerly imbibed the liberal philosophy. But distances, the toilsomeness of our daily life, and above all the for ever changing constitution of our citizen-body have made it easy for the citizen-body to be exploited. The forms remained. But all that is superficial. It is the essence of democracy that no citizen should be treated as a chattel, as a means to an end, by any other citizen, or by the State itself. We may seem to have been ultra-democratic in throwing open our citizenship to a Babel of immigrants. Perhaps we were. But at the same time we have turned our citizen-body, which at one time promised to be largely composed of the fairly well-to-do (the sort of class which every profound thinker, from Aristotle to Wordsworth, has desiderated as the basis of a free society) into a number of sharply differentiated classes. We have a very large proletariat, to begin with,—something we were once without. And we have a millionaire class, whose interests are so removed from those of their fellow-citizens that on this side, too, free society is threatened. The millionaires are no more to be blamed for the paupers than the paupers are to be blamed for the millionaires. No one deliberately willed either of them. But we have them both. Real political power is in the hands of the millionaires, of course. Perhaps no one deliberately willed that. In any case it is only natural for them to attempt to keep it when they have it. Most of our articulate political utterance is directed against political power falling into the hands of the proletariat. The proletariat have given no sign of ambition in that direction. But they make their influence felt! They determine our manners, our amusements, the tone of our newspapers and our elections, the shelves of our public libraries and book-shops. They determine, more than any educationist seems to have realized, the standards of our education. Our character, in short, has become the character of a proletariat; and hence, though our proletariat has no political power, we have laid our character open to the reproaches deserved by a decadent democracy.

Once, in a "new country," a grain-growing country, which attained such material prosperity that its chief city grew very large and was peopled with new-comers from every known country, there lived a learned Jew named Philo. Greek was still the learning of the world, and Philo's city, Alexandria, contained much of the erudition of the time. He himself was so steeped in Greek thought that there came to be a proverb: "Either Philo is a Platonist, or Plato is a Philonist." Surveying the various stages of Greek politics, from Homer to Aristotle, and the various imperialisms, Macedonian, Punic, Mithridatic and Roman that had since succeeded, and knowing from his Jewish lore the greatness and decay of many an earlier dynasty, Philo laid it down that democracy was the perfect form of government, the form of government towards which the whole world would progress. But he said it sadly: not Alexandria, *colluvio gentium*, would attain such government; nor would his generation, in that shifting world he gazed upon, witness its fulfillment anywhere.