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The Crisis of Democracy

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The Crises of Democracy

By B. K. SANDWELL.

LORD BRYCE, in his work on "Modern Democracies," posits a working definition of a democracy as "a government in which the will of the majority of qualified citizens rules, taking the qualified citizens to constitute the great bulk of the inhabitants, say, roughly, at least three-fourths, so that the physical force of the citizens coincides (broadly speaking) with their voting power." *Modern Democracies* was written in 1920, at a moment when a singular optimism prevailed on the subject of democracy. It was believed in many quarters that the world had been made safe for democracy everywhere except in Russia, and would shortly be made safe even there. That as soon as the world had been made safe for it, democracy would at once come forth and establish itself in all countries amid general rejoicings seems also to have been widely believed. The new and propagandist type of autocracy which occupied the Tsar's palaces in Moscow and Petrograd was thought to be a very temporary affair. The old type of autocracy represented by the Hohenzollerns, the Hapsburgs and the Sublime Porte had been crushingly defeated and replaced by popular franchise governments. The phenomena of Fascism and Naziism were unknown. It did indeed look as if democracy were not only safe but sound.

And if there had not been a serious error in Lord Bryce's definition of democracy, we should not now have to hold meetings in the Province of Nova Scotia—the first part of British North America to win for itself democratic self-government without civil strife—to discuss the Crisis of Democracy. For the Crisis of Democracy arises to-day very largely from the fact that the physical force of the citizens does not coincide, even speaking as broadly as one can speak and remain truthful, with their voting power. If it did, there would be no object in an appeal from ballots to bullets or airplane bombs or the other means of exercising force over what may be a majority of the citizens, for that majority would be as effective in physical conflict as in the polling-booths. But there is no such coincidence. A minority of the citizens, possessing certain advantages, can impose its will upon a majority; and a minority which thinks it has that power will seek to use it whenever it dislikes, too greatly to endure them, the policies of the majority.

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As a matter of fact, it has never been safe to assume that the physical force of the citizens in a democracy coincides with their voting power; but there have been long periods of time when the dislike of the minority for the policies of the majority was seldom strong enough to bring about the appeal from votes to force. The two subjects about which men customarily entertain feelings of sufficient intensity to make them willing to challenge the decisions of their rulers are property and religion. Democracies, for obvious reasons, are seldom very oppressive in matters of religion, and as a consequence matters of property are usually the cause of crisis in a democratic state. At the beginning of the era of modern democracy, property was almost universally regarded as a practically sacred institution, although from time to time certain forms of it became the object of attack. Thus the difference in view between the Northern and Southern States on property rights in negroes was the cause of a severe crisis in the democracy of the United States; and the difference in view between the Irish peasantry and the English landlords on absentee landlordism was the cause of a more protracted crisis in the United Kingdom. Both of these differences were largely sectional, and could therefore have been solved by the setting up of a new democracy in part of the sovereign territory of the old one, and the Irish one, after having been complicated by many additional grievances, was at length alleviated by that method; but a strong nationalist instinct against the division of the national domain prevented that solution in the United States, and greatly delayed it in Ireland.

But in recent years the doctrine of the sacredness of property rights—a doctrine which alone could restrain the non-property owning majority in a democracy from using its sovereign power to make free with the belongings of the property-owning minority—has been extensively broken down. From being a sacred right which none dared question, as in the early nineteenth century, property became by the end of that century a right only to be defended if it could be shown that its existence conferred important benefits on the well-being of the community. Property-owners, like kings, ceased during that century to hold tenure from God, and began to hold only "during good behaviour." At first the invasion of these rights, by the sovereign power in the hands to a growing extent of a property-less majority, was very moderate and tentative, in both the field of taxation and that of regulation. The protests of the property-owners were loud, but they had effective methods of restraining the ardour of the representatives of the majority, and they had no thought of appealing to force.

They even went on, reluctantly doubtless but steadily, accepting the progressive enlargement of the electorate with new classes of non-property-owning voters, until at last everybody over twenty-one was on the lists and no further additions could be made.

It should be noted that this progressive nineteenth century attack on the sacredness of property was not, like the attack on slave-holding and absentee-landlordism, in any way a geographical-sectionally sectional attack. Property-owners and non-property-owners alike are fairly evenly distributed over the surface of Canada, for example. The former are less in evidence in Alberta and Saskatchewan than they are in Montreal and Toronto; but it is improbable that the strife between people who desire a radically new conception of property rights and those who oppose it could be solved in Canada by detaching Alberta and Saskatchewan from the national unit. There are enough non-property-owners in every other political subdivision of Canada to make the conflict a difficult one, even if Alberta and Saskatchewan set themselves up as independent sovereignties on Socialist or Social Credit principles. The problem of Spain would not be solved by the independence of Catalonia, nor those of the United States by the setting up of a co-operative commonwealth in an independent Kansas.

We are faced, therefore, with a situation in which a dissident minority is likely to refuse to accept the decisions of the majority, in the belief that the majority, far from having physical force in proportion to its numerical strength, will be found not to have enough physical force to carry out its decisions. It does not greatly matter, from the standpoint of democracy, what the particular policy of this minority is, or what is the policy of the majority which it decides to resist. The minority may be in favour of property; in which case it will probably consist largely of property-owners, but it may also be against property, in which case the majority will probably consist not only of property-owners but also of non-property-owners who are not convinced that the more or less complete abolition of property will do them any good. If either of these minorities can possess itself of control over a strategic element in the situation, notably the military and police equipment of the nation on the one hand and the most vitally essential economic services on the other, it will have a very sporting chance of doing much better in a show of force than it did in a count of ballots; and if its dislike of the majority policies is strong enough, it will make the appeal to force.

It is often the easier for the minority to make this appeal, because it can in modern conditions be made without the open

admission that it is a rebellion against the rule of the majority. A general strike, for example, cannot be impartially regarded as anything except an attack against the existing government, aiming to bring about its collapse by non-democratic means. But it can be represented, and is undoubtedly regarded by many of its most ardent supporters, as a mere extension of some small and local trade dispute with no political significance. On the other hand, a minority which is opposed to changes in the property system can usually give a colorable excuse for its resistance in arguing that the majority government is moving farther or faster than the constitutional procedure of the country permits, and is therefore itself the real rebel. For not even the most democratic of constitutions has ever endowed the representatives of the majority with unlimited power to change the economic system in a single session or by a single act; and in a good many democracies, such as the United States, the old "sacred" concept of property has been embedded in the constitution in such a way that any radical impairment of property rights is fairly certain to be blocked by the courts. Any attempt by Congress to override or evade a Supreme Court decision would be almost sure to meet with resistance in the name of loyalty to the constitution. The situation is even more delicate in countries in which the "unwritten constitution" of the British parliamentary system prevails; for the powers of legislatures within their assigned spheres are there practically unlimited, and the people themselves must in the long run decide what is in accord with the spirit of British institutions and what is not.

The successful working of the democratic system depends obviously upon the acceptance by the minority of the decisions of the majority. That acceptance can no longer be relied upon when all of the following conditions are present: (1) the majority has ceased to be desirous of conciliating the minority and securing its acceptance of the majority decisions by making them as tolerable as possible; (2) the minority has a sufficiently strong objection to the majority decisions; and (3) the minority has sufficient reason to hope that it may achieve by force what it cannot achieve by votes. All of these conditions are widespread in the surviving democracies of the world to-day, and they are unfortunately much enhanced by a further condition, namely the lively willingness of organized and government-supported societies in various countries to go to the aid of rebellious minorities of their own economic creed in other lands. This lends an international character to rebellion which it has never possessed before, since the rise of the modern nation-state. Rebels have hitherto been generally dis-

tasteful not only to their own governments but to others, on the ground that the undermining of authority in one state is bad for authority everywhere; but the non-intervention agreement regarding Spain is a striking proof that this attitude no longer exists, and that the future attitude of governments toward rebels in another country will be determined wholly by the economic creed to which they belong. The international co-operation upon which recognized governments could count for aid in the suppression of their domestic rebels is largely abolished, and the rebellion's chances of success are materially enlarged.

There is, however, no need to regard this as more than a transitory phase, or to suppose that the conditions which made democracy workable during most of the nineteenth century have been permanently abolished. We have seen that the controlling factor in the removal of these conditions at the present time is the intensity of the minority's dislike of the policies adopted by the majority—or in some cases, dislike of the policies which it is feared may be forced upon the majority by another minority. There is no reason to suppose that the present violent conflict of opinion between those who advocate private ownership of the instruments of production and those who oppose it is necessarily permanent. The extreme advocates of each of these policies predict that the other system will eventually prove itself unworkable and disappear; and if their anticipations are correct, the existing violent antagonisms will obviously disappear also. But there seems to be no more reason for predicting the total disappearance of either system than there would have been for predicting—as many extremists did predict—the total disappearance of either Christianity or Mohammedanism as the result of the conflict between those two creeds in the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages. What happened then was that the one religion proved more suitable for the north and west and the other for the east and south, and a state of stabilization was eventually arrived at. The same thing, one supposes, might eventually develop between Communism and Capitalism, especially if one assumes that modifications will take place in both of them which will take the edge off the propagandist zeal of both parties. Such stabilization of the Western World between Communism and Capitalism is, however, not likely to take place until after a somewhat protracted period of fighting to establish the mutual boundaries of the two systems, and certainly not until the propagandist zeal of both parties has very considerably died down. But it is well to remember that the present high pitch of propagandist zeal is largely defensive, arising from the feeling of

each party that its own system is not yet wholly secure in the territory in which it is at present operative, and needs to be bolstered up by the establishment of the same system in other countries. The longer the Communist system is operative in Russia, the more secure it will feel itself, and the less will be its need to propagandize in other countries, while the longer the propaganda is successfully resisted in these other countries the less hope there will be of its success.

These reflections are not much of a consolation for those of us who would like to feel assured that democracy will continue to be active in our own countries during our lifetime; but they do suggest that if in any particular country it is compelled to abnegate its powers, the abnegation need not necessarily be regarded as permanent. Whichever economic system is imposed upon any country, even if imposed by a minority, is pretty sure to come in the long run to command the adherence of the majority; and when that adherence is assured and the danger of foreign intervention eliminated, the tendency to conciliate public opinion by putting a large measure of power in the hands of the majority of the citizens will again become effective. There are strong signs of such a tendency in Russia, where the danger of revolt from Communism is becoming more and more negligible. There will be no sign of it in Germany or Italy until the danger of revolt to Communism is equally negligible.

Without, therefore, admitting that democracy is anything but the most logical, the most reasonable, the most happiness-producing of human forms of government, we may possibly be forced to conclude that it may at long intervals have to renew itself like the seed in the vegetable world, by going underground in order to germinate—by dying in order to come to life. Aristotle's description of the cycle of political change, which was somewhat discredited during the nineteenth century period of optimism about democracy that came to an end with the Bryce work already referred to, has taken on a new interest in the light of post-war events. I take this condensed account of Aristotle's description of the political cycle from Everett Dean Martin's "Farewell to Revolution":

"A conqueror establishes a despotism with himself as tyrant, having absolute power of life and death over his subjects. Tyranny gradually becomes modified into monarchy, a form of government in which the right to rule becomes hereditary, traditional and accepted. There grows up a certain sense of mutual devotion and obligation between ruler and subjects. This relationship comes

to be supported by custom, law and class distinctions. Class distinctions give rise to a nobility, among whom the monarch tends to become *primus inter pares*. Gradually the nobility itself supplants the monarch, as in the Hellenic and Roman republics. This stage is aristocracy. Sooner or later aristocracy degenerates into oligarchy, as it did during the last years of the Roman republic. The aristocratic privilege of leadership comes to be a special privilege rather than a social obligation. Powerful and successful plebeians gain admittance to the inner circle of privilege. Class rule becomes a device for the exploitation of the many by the few. The few have lost their power to command and lead. There results conflict between the exploiters and the exploited. Oligarchy is followed by democracy. But democracy cannot long endure. Its weakness and follies and spirit of faction sooner or later render it the victim of the clever politician who with a measure of popular approval establishes a new dictatorship. Thus democracy inevitably gives rise again to tyranny, and the cycle or 'revolution' is completed."

If Lord Bryce's view that in a democracy the physical force of the citizens coincides with their voting power were approximately true, the task of converting a democracy into an oligarchy or a tyranny would obviously be a very difficult one, and on the other hand the conversion of a more autocratic government into a democracy would be relatively easy. As a matter of fact, I suggest that the times in history when democracies have been extensively established may have been times at which the Bryce proposition came nearest to being true, and that it is not until it ceases to be even approximately true, not until the distribution of physical force becomes widely different from that of voting power, that existing democracies tend to break down into autocracy. And this change in the distribution of physical force depends upon the current technique in the art of warfare. If that technique is one in which the individual fighter is of major importance, and his equipment and organization can be easily improvised, democracy can be established and maintained without much difficulty. But as soon as organization and equipment for the exercise of force become extremely complex and costly, you begin to introduce a factor highly embarrassing to democracy. The nineteenth century democracies grew up in a period of relatively inexpensive fighting, in which a good man with a good gun was the essential factor. But even then the chief preoccupation of the founders of these democracies was to prevent the armed forces of the state from being used to coerce the citizens. The problem was less serious in England than in any other country, because the defences of England for

some hundreds of years have been chiefly naval, and a sea force has little value as a means of coercing a land population. But even in Great Britain the army has not, in recent years, been wholly guiltless of demonstrations intended to coerce the elected representatives of the people; and in other democracies—notably those countries which were democracies and have recently ceased to be so—the interference of the army in politics has been constant and notorious.

The twentieth-century army, it must be remembered, is not a mere aggregation of fighting men. It is also an enormously expensive mechanical equipment; and the more highly skilled operators of this equipment tend to become a professional class very much isolated from the general body of the citizenry, and very conscious of its own power. We do not yet know the full extent of that power, for the air arm, in which it chiefly resides, is less than twenty years old, and its value as an instrument for the coercing of a democracy has scarcely been tested; but it seems likely to be enormous.

It is therefore something of a question, and the founders of the American democracy would have been the first to admit it, whether any democracy can maintain itself securely in a world in which the international situation is such as to necessitate the maintenance of great and highly mechanized land defensive forces. It is too much to expect that, in a period of highly contentious issues between parties in the state, the possessors of this overwhelmingly powerful force will never do anything with it except what the civil power tells them to do; yet the assumption that they must obey the civil power is the very foundation of democracy.

Why are the issues about which men are currently disputing in the democratic countries so abnormally contentious? It is customary to answer this question by saying that it is because men's selfish interests are so violently involved in them; but I think that is an inadequate and unduly cynical answer. The violence of the dispute is not entirely because the rich want to hold their riches and their power and the poor want to get them. That is a part of it, but not the largest part. The friends and the enemies of Capitalism have a much loftier ground for disagreement than that. The friends of Capitalism are convinced that only under that system can human enterprise be efficiently directed to the satisfaction of human needs, and personal liberty be at the same time maintained. The enemies of Capitalism are convinced that Capitalism renders war inevitable, and that its abolition is an essential step towards the establishment of peace. The cynic will dismiss these

ideas as a mere "rationalization" of the instinctive desire to defend or promote one's own class interests, but even rationalization may sometimes be honest. If any of us, I think, were really convinced that Capitalism makes war inevitable, and that its abolition is necessary for the promotion of peace, we should be irresistibly impelled to seek the abolition of Capitalism, even at the cost of a possible reduction in productive efficiency and a possible submergence of the democratic system. Ideas like these take hold of men's minds with all the intensity and inspiring force of religious conviction. Professor Laski, once an instructor in our own McGill University in one of its most brilliant periods, says in his *Democracy in Crisis*:

I do not myself doubt that all solutions which are the outcome of rational discussion are the best solutions; I only doubt the prospect of maintaining the temper in which they can emerge. What is historically notable in all periods like our own is the way in which men of strong conviction, on either side, are unprepared to trust in reason as the arbiter of difference. That is seen, I think, in the decline of tolerance in the post-war years. Men have become so passionate about the ends they seek, that they pardon the means taken to achieve them so long as they are in agreement with those ends. The Conservative Party in Great Britain, big business in America, display a fierce indignation toward the methods by which the Soviet system has consolidated its authority, but they display a singular lenity towards the use of those same methods by Mussolini, because they approve the purpose he is serving. So, similarly, the British Labour Party, even while it is opposed to Communist method, has been unable to avoid a certain sympathy for the Russian experiment; but its hatred of Fascism has been thoroughgoing and profound

Historically, I suggest, periods in which reason is the accepted basis of social decisions are marked by certain quite definable features. They are ages in which political stability is assured on the one hand, and economic expansion is steadily continuous on the other. The psychological results of this coincidence are to make an atmosphere in which reasonableness has its opportunity. . . . To maintain an atmosphere in which reason can prevail, it appears essential that the character of change shall permit so slow an adjustment of predominant habits as not to provoke a sense of outrage. Men only agree to disagree when nothing that they regard as vital is the price of disagreement.

This is a very clear warning that the continued activities of democracy in any country can be assured only by a determination on the part of a strong majority of the citizens not to lend any countenance to extreme policies either of the Left or of the Right—not to permit any change requiring so rapid an adjustment of

predominant habits as to produce a sense of outrage, nor any change on the other hand which threatens to make gradual adjustment impossible. Obviously this is a very difficult condition to obtain, and equally obviously it demands a large body of sober, middle-class opinion which cannot be swayed to the extreme policies of either the Left or the Right. The lack of such a body of middle-class opinion is generally admitted to be the cause of the present horrible conflict in Spain; and the spectacle of that conflict should intensify the resolution of moderate persons in every democracy to heed Mr. Laski's warning.

Mr. Everett Dean Martin, from whom I have already quoted, is confident that democracy can be preserved on these terms in the countries in which it still survives; he goes on record as believing that the Revolution against Democracy has gone as far as it will go, and "we are at the present time at the close of a major cycle of revolutionary activity." It is true that Mr. Martin is an American, and that Americans have long shown a rather notable capacity for believing that which it makes them happy to believe. However, the chief ground of his optimism is a profound faith in the intelligence and moral character of the immense middle-class in the English-speaking democracies, France and the Scandinavian states; and that faith is not so unreasonable that we can dismiss it off-hand, nor so common that we can afford to ignore it. Some of the conditions on which Mr. Martin relies are perhaps a little more in evidence in Canada than even in his own country. Thus we have no danger of any faction utilizing the power of a great military establishment, for we have no great military establishment to be utilized. Our population consists of a very general intermixture not only of races but of religions, and we are habituated to courses of toleration and conciliation which go far beyond those practised in most other countries. So far as the Dominion is concerned, the seizure of power by a minority consolidated by considerations of racial or religious solidarity is almost inconceivable. This population, moreover, still possesses in a high degree the pioneer mentality of those whose fathers or grandfathers at least were engaged in the single-handed task of wresting a livelihood from a not too kindly Nature, and one of the chief ingredients of this mentality is a strong dislike for any extensive, constant or pettifogging interference by authority. Many of us add to this mentality an Anglo-Saxon distrust of dogmatism, a dislike for too positive statements of belief, an inclination to think that truth may usually be found midway between two extremes, and wisdom in moderate courses. The social separation between economic classes, while

quite bad enough, is not nearly so definite or insuperable with us as it is in Europe, and I think a little less so than it is in the United States. The distribution of property and of income, while far from ideal, is somewhat less uneven than in the United States; it has not been improved by the economic events of the last six years, and it is earnestly to be hoped that the process of recovery now beginning will be less a matter of the piling up of further large fortunes than of the general improvement of the security and economic position of the Canadian masses. On the whole, even to-day, all these factors are more favorable to the maintenance of democracy in Canada than in any other part of the world with the possible exceptions of Scandinavia and Australasia. Even so, it is difficult to imagine Canada maintaining any constitutional system after the United States should have radically departed from it.

I cannot close without a further reference to the fact that rebellion *by* a government is just as possible in a constitutional country as rebellion *against* a government. The unconstitutional use of power by those who have acquired it constitutionally is just as much revolution as the unconstitutional seizure of power. Present-day circumstances have increased the danger of this type of rebellion more than of any other type. The only possible safeguard is the vigilance of the whole body of citizens, and the proper mechanism through which that vigilance should be exerted is the parliamentary Opposition. The task of the Opposition is as vital to democracy as that of the Government. The press, lacking parliamentary privilege for its utterances and party solidarity for its efforts, is no efficient substitute for a strong and alert group on the left of the Speaker. It follows that the tendency to a growing approach to unanimity in the results of elections to legislative bodies is profoundly to be regretted, and if continued will have to be checked by changes in the system of representation. It would do no harm if a minority comprising one-third of the electors had slightly more than one-third of the elected representatives. It may do great harm when, as not uncommonly happens now, it has less than half of its proper proportion.