

DEMOCRACY AND THE GENERAL ELECTION

ROUSSEAU once ridiculed the British Constitution by declaring that the Englishman was only really free during a General Election, and that then he used his freedom so badly that he deserved to lose it. A great number of Rousseau's most cherished ideas have perished long ago, and yet our 'ridiculous' Constitution remains, fundamentally the same. Very soon every elector will be asked to exercise that political freedom, which, apparently, is so rare a privilege, and the time may be ripe for a little hard thinking as to what that power really involves. The world now offers a variety of political systems, all claiming to be more genuinely democratic than our own, the old-fashioned mother of them all. How does the power of the British citizen compare with the newer developments in the power of the people in the U.S.A., or even in the U.S.S.R.? What is involved in this declaration by each elector every five years? These are questions which those rare electors who have either the time, leisure, or interest to read the less sensational periodicals may well bother to inquire into during these last few weeks before the Election takes place.

This Election is bound to be of historic importance, as it marks the end of that movement for the reform of the franchise, which was started with such excitement and trepidation by the Whigs in 1832. The years 1867, 1884, 1918, and 1928 are so many steps the nation has taken with a slow but unhesitating stride along a road as inevitable as any in her history. 'We have opened a door which can never again be closed,' moaned the young Tory, Newman, proving himself a much wiser prophet than the introducer of the bill himself, Lord John Russell, nicknamed 'Finality Jack,' because of his belief that the reform of 1832 was to be final. But if, as seems by no means impossible, the

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Labour Party should secure a working majority, the year 1929 will become as familiar a date to our descendants as 1832 is to ourselves. It is true that people felt themselves on the brink of some unknown and dreaded future, of some 'leap in the dark,' both before the Act of 1832 and the Act of 1867 (which enfranchised the industrial workers), and that events were to prove that both Acts made little immediate difference. History may repeat itself once more, but there is no guarantee that it will, and much to indicate that it will not. Party politics have hitherto rested on a tacit agreement between the parties on the really fundamental issues, involving an understanding not to undo each other's work, combined with a difference in point of view as to how and how soon the needed changes should be made. If one looks back at the legislation of the nineteenth century, one will find the general movement from Protection to Free Trade in commerce, and from *laissez-faire* to socialisation in industry, was as much due to the Conservatives as to the Liberals. But those days are now passed: the Labour Party is in principle sharply divided from the older parties. The division is not merely political; it is also economic, and it touches economics at its most burning issue, the distribution of wealth. We may try and blink the fact, but it remains one that up till now the interests of big property, the 'have much,' have ruled for their own good directly, and for the good of the 'have not much' only indirectly; we are now on the eve of the rule of the latter for their own good directly, and only very indirectly for the good of the 'have much.' Another way of putting it is that the old parties stand directly for production, and indirectly for distribution; the Labour Party stands directly for better distribution, and indirectly for production. Time alone can say whether the second way is to 'throw away the baby with the bath.'

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The elector, then, who is about to make use of his quinquennial sovereignty, as Rousseau might have put it, will probably have to make a decision far more momentous than either he or his fathers have had to make; and we shall see that the next General Election will be not only more important, but also be of a different nature from the usual appeal to the people in the British democratic system.

To understand this, and to answer the question whether the change is a good one, we must analyse very briefly the theory and practice of our democracy, so as to be quite clear about the part played normally by our 'sovereign' elector.

In theory, the expressed will of over twenty-eight million electors of Great Britain as to who shall for a period of five years make laws, oversee finance, and criticise the Government is absolute and effective; further, that will indirectly settles who shall actually govern, since the Government is responsible to, and can only be maintained with the favour of, the elected legislators. In practice, this 'will of the people' is much less effective, since it is subject, first, to the organization necessary to make it at all effective—*i. e.*, the organization of the parties, which, without being directly responsible to anybody, nominate the candidates for Parliament and arrange a programme of action; secondly, to the actual Government, which has come more and more to monopolise the initiative and control of legislation itself during its period of office.

The elector, who is offered the noble position of 'part-sovereign,' and whose will, he is told, is the final word that counts, may, therefore, feel that all this struggle for democracy and equality of political rights has meant very little indeed, he may look with an eye of envy at the proud status of the citizens of certain other countries, who apparently enjoy so much fuller political power, and he may look forward to the coming

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election as a step in the direction of completer democracy. He has heard of the Referendum, which gives every citizen the power to make a decision as absolute and final as that of anyone else, not merely as to who shall represent him, but as to whether such and such a bill shall become law. The 'Initiative' goes much further by giving the citizen the right to propose any new legislation he may fancy. The election of rulers, administrators, and even of judges, has given electors in certain places the final say as to who shall govern them, from the President of the country to the humblest mayor; while the 'Recall' makes them irresponsible judges of the conduct of those they have elected, without their having the benefit of a trial. The system by which candidates are nominated in the U.S.A. enables the electors not only to accept or reject those presented, but to select who shall be presented. In a federation, the citizen's small power in the federation is compensated for by his greater power in the State or Commune, with the result that he becomes himself a direct legislator in certain Swiss Communes. While, finally, the elector may be content to start with the consideration of a reform with which he is more familiar, Proportional Representation, whereby it is possible to avoid the anomaly of legislators representing a minority only of their constituencies.

In such ways, he will feel that it is possible to solve the puzzle, which Rousseau had thought insoluble—viz., how to have a large state which is truly democratic. Yet, strangely enough, despite the fact that they have been discussed, none of these ideas have really found favour with us. Has this meant that the 'sovereignty' of the British elector is limited, or has the political genius of the British people been wise enough to see that the new democratic tricks are nothing but tricks narrowing rather than enlarging the function of the citizen?

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There are, we believe, two ends which true democracy must try to attain; it must aim at obtaining the good of all; it must aim at giving effect to the will of all; there is also one condition it must fulfil; it must be moral. Let us notice this condition first.

The State, to be a moral institution at all, must do no wrong, and, within certain limits must let no wrong be done. This may be expressed in various ways: we may say, with the scholastics, that the law of the State, or the 'positive' law, can never be more than the application of the natural law to the special subject-matter with which the State deals; or we may say in more modern terminology that the State must limit itself to the enforcing of what the moral conscience of Society thinks should be enforced by force of law, and to the regulation of matters morally indifferent, such as the law of the road. But however we put it, it is recognised not only by Catholics, but by all serious political philosophers that the days of Hobbes and Austin, who exalted the laws of the State above the laws of nature, are gone: such a doctrine, apart from its immorality, leads to the enslaving of man either to an impersonal least common denominator, or to a so-called general will, which is usually the will of a small minority of self-constituted leaders as in Hegelian Prussia or Soviet Russia.

Given this, the State must be for the good of all. Before seeing what this means in a democracy, let us deal with a temptation, to which nearly all citizens are liable from time to time. The good of all, they think, is a perfectly simple end in the abstract; it can be studied and thought out; it can then be realised by the authority of a great personal leader, to whom all authority is committed. What is absurd is to imagine that a limping, hesitating, self-conscious democracy, progressing by trial and error, can either clearly conceive it, still less pretend to attain it by any but the

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most roundabout roads. If we are serious in our desire to attain the good of all, let us turn to those whose profession it is to think, or entrust ourselves to a super-man; democracy under these circumstances is but a pretence. This we know to be no fanciful temptation, since democracy abroad is on its trial, and is being judged severely. But in the case of England the question is not what is the ideal system; the 'live' question is, and always has been, what kind of system can we stand? It is within these limits only that we need enquire. The moment an Englishman gets used to a thing he begins to look upon it as inevitable and as part of his life, unless a shock should unsettle his complacency; and this instinct is one of his best safeguards. It is the sign of true conservatism, the conservatism of a Burke, which consists in viewing the religious, social and political activities of man as the result of years of silent and very complicated growth. They are a living thing, as living as the individual for whose benefit they exist; they can be developed—not changed. The Englishman instinctively distrusts the professional reformer, who presents him with a ready-made theory, however plausible: it is like asking a man to substitute a perfect Robot for his imperfect child. The theorist, however successful in his analysis of dead matter, however skilful in his study of animal life, is bound to be only plausible when he comes to deal with the infinite complexities of man's social life. The general propositions enunciating the ends of political life are clear enough, the particular ways in which these ends are to be attained in this and that concrete medium so baffling to analyse, are obscure. It is this instinctive distrust of the *a priori* thinker, and this love of muddling through that makes the Englishman fight shy of the one-man rule, however easy it may be to show him the advantages of a dictatorship. He feels that Napoleon III or King Amanullah are commoner

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types of dictators than Mussolini, about whose work, even, he will not allow himself to judge till it has been tested by future generations. Peter the Great was his prototype, and half the modern troubles of Russia are his direct inheritance. The only good of all, then, which we can stand is a good of all aimed at by a democratic system, and we need not consider any ideal good or any ideal State.

To understand this democratic view of the good of all, we must take it in connection with the second end of democracy, the giving effect to the will of all. This might be better described as the 'say' of all. The elector wishes that, while the State should be governed for the good of all, he should have a 'say,' at least equal to anyone else's in the main lines of national policy in all its important departments, for he feels, both from the lessons of history, and from his own experience of men, that, over a long period of years, no one is better fitted to see that this national policy is not in the interests of a privileged minority than the people as a whole. The business of governing is highly skilled, and no democrat in his senses can pretend that the people can undertake it: the purely technical part of it calls for the services of trained experts, in no way at the mercy of changing parties; while the direction of policy and the solving of problems that arise daily in the working of an organization dealing with changing circumstances calls for the quickest, soundest, and most reliable combination of ability and common sense, which we recognise to be the special qualifications of a statesman or, in a lesser degree, of a politician. But this organization and its direction is for the good of all, and no one, in the last resort, is so well able to say what is the good of all, as he who wants that good; no one knows so well as the wearer when and where the shoe pinches, therefore each and every wearer must be effectively heard.

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At first sight, it might seem that the new devices in working a democratic political system, which we noticed above, would enable the voice of the citizen to be more effectively heard, and so give him a better opportunity of fulfilling his part in the democracy, and yet without hindering the effective working of the Government. Is this so? Are they not rather tending to entrust the actual policy and government of the State, and in some cases, as nearly as may be, the actual technical administration, to the people itself, thereby imperilling the condition of any democracy, that there should be good and effective ruling? In so doing are they not, paradoxically enough, imperilling the very purpose of democracy, viz. : to guarantee the right of each and every citizen to have an absolute and effective ' say ' as to when and where the shoe pinches, and as to the possible remedies?

There can hardly be two opinions as to the first consequence, and it is admitted by those who advocate the new direct democracy, as it is called. The work of the politician and of the technical administration tends to become more and more a matter of setting the proper questions to the electorate on matters of detailed legislation and policy, a large part of which cannot be understood by the majority of the people. The answer so obtained can have no reference to the end of the legislation, which is the good of all, since to be able to judge of a policy in terms of its end one must understand it thoroughly. In the special case of the Initiative, there cannot exist even that minimum of continuity of policy, which is absolutely essential if the nation is not to be at the mercy of every wind. It may be objected that this argument would lead logically to the restricting of the franchise to the educated, or, at least, to plural voting—*i. e.*, giving more votes to the educated—a change that all would call undemocratic. We agree in the case of these new devices, but

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it is to misunderstand the special genius of the old-fashioned representative or indirect democracy to advocate any franchise but the system of one man (or woman) one vote, and this is where the second consequence—*viz.*, that not even the 'say' of all can be made effective—can be shown to follow. If there is some guarantee of good and steady government, it is possible and necessary for every citizen to have his 'say' as to where the shoe pinches. A shoe can only pinch—to keep up the simile—when it is being worn and of some use: it is the defect in an otherwise tolerable and useful whole which can be properly pointed out and remedied. The direct democracy must tend either to such discontinuity and unsettlement of policy as to threaten a throwing away of the shoe without any guarantee of a better one. To prevent this a restricted franchise would be essential, which would be undemocratic; in our system, where the people do not try to govern, but are really—and over a long period of time—making themselves sufficiently felt to be the real guiding hand, it would be a bad mistake, for the State should be guided in the interests of all.

The most striking example of an apparently democratic reform, which, in reality, defeats its own purpose, is the Recall, which has been introduced in some of the States of the U.S.A. What finer tribute to the citizen could there be than, by giving him the power of recalling them, to make him the ever-watchful judge of those to whom he has entrusted the reins of office? Yet its effect is so to shackle the administrator that he dare not act disinterestedly at all, since his bread and butter depend on pleasing the people in all its moods. Such a democratic measure is a return to the system when judges were at the mercy of an irresponsible king, for who could be more irresponsible than a mass of people giving an opinion on a matter of which they are not in a fit state to judge? In general,

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the tendency in certain democracies to overload the decisions that have to be made by the citizens forces the latter to act irresponsibly; and if we have to choose, the irresponsibility of one intelligent, even if vicious, man is preferable to the majority of an irresponsible multitude, for that is to trust to an impersonal and blind force.

There are two possible ways in which a number of people can come to an agreement about a course to be pursued for the good of all. One way is to propose the alternative to all the people, and let them vote yes or no, thus deceiving them into the belief that their voice is of great weight in deciding what is to be done, when, in fact, its importance in each individual case is very small. The other way is to sit round a table and discuss the measure, thus, with good will, arriving at a decision which is something more than the common denominator of the individual wills of all present. On such occasions it is always felt that if the discussion has not led to unanimity, but instead to a division, it has almost failed. In the second case, the good of all is more likely to be accomplished than in the first, but the problem of dealing with large numbers arises. Democracy by mass vote gives at least the appearance of being a mass decision, while democracy by discussion appears to be unworkable except with small numbers. Yet by the combination of sound representation with the organisation of a party system, which is truly the expression of the thoughts and discussions of the citizens, the difficulty can be overcome. Where there exists true citizenship—*i.e.*, where the great number of citizens are intelligently interested in the affairs of the country, where the parties are not imposed on the people by force of the sheer weight of oratorical and literary monopoly, but really spring from the people, voicing their inarticulate thoughts, and where the points of party policy put before the citizens are the

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result of the serious discussion of the best minds, there is every reason to believe that the citizen's periodical vote is something far deeper, far more sovereign, and far more likely to effect the double purpose of democracy—*viz.*, the good of all and the 'say' of all—than the direct democracy advocated so often abroad. The one requisite is sound citizenship, and that depends very largely on the native virtues of the people—virtues, which years of political freedom have given Englishmen in a large measure—and on the educative powers of the system itself. Our old-fashioned methods, combined, as they are, with a broadly conceived local government, are certainly not less educative in respect of citizenship than direct democracy, which tends to substitute decision-making for thought. This is not to say that all is well with our system or our parties; there will be, as there always have been, reforms; for our constitution is alive and growing; there have been great improvements in the quality of the different parties, if we are correct in our analysis of an ideal party, and there is room for still more; but it is not mere self admiration to say that the British Constitution, the mother of all modern democratic constitutions, has little to learn from her daughters.

The elector, then, who is called to make his decision in a few weeks may rest assured that his act is as worthy of his citizenship as any democratic system yet devised could make it. But it will be clear from the above that, for once, his decision will be more akin to the decisions of electors in direct democracies, than the normal and most important function of the citizen in our indirect system. We have seen that the convention on which our democracy rests is that the parties shall not differ fundamentally, else the danger of discontinuity in government, the danger to the sound ruling which is the condition of the good of all, and of the

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'say' of all. Now, the elector is likely to have to make a decision which will determine whether a fundamentally different economic policy shall obtain in this country. Such a decision, if we are right, bears a close resemblance to a Referendum on whether England's wealth shall be developed on the principle of freedom and production or on that of state control and better distribution. And so, for once, we find ourselves drifting into direct democracy. It cannot be doubted that this real division between parties destined to succeed each other in power will tend to force a greater number of issues before the people, thus multiplying general elections, which are really disguised Referendums. This, we maintain, so far from exalting the sovereignty of the citizen, really impairs it, and is to be looked upon as the real danger to our constitution. A democracy which is not successful in giving the people sound and stable government must lead to anarchy or reaction, two dangers so far admirably avoided in this country. Our hope for the future must be founded on the excellent political education of the people—itsself the consequence of our own type of democracy—and on the extraordinary flexibility and vitality of our political institutions, which have adapted themselves to situations hardly less dangerous in the past. But it should be again emphasised that the elector need not fear either the continuance in power of the Conservatives, or the advent of Labour, so much as the possible friction resulting from the fundamental divergence between them; for this will mean that the government of the country may not be properly carried on, and that is a necessary condition of the two ends of any real democracy and of any real sovereignty of the people—namely, the good of all and the 'say' of all.

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