

PARTY POLITICS OR CITIZENSHIP?

Some time ago I attended a political meeting. I should have known better, for I had been to other political meetings. But with the hope that springs eternal, especially in the breast of the ordinary citizen around election time, I went to hear what those who wished to be my representatives had to say for themselves. They had to say what they usually have to say—nothing. They spent the evening patting themselves on the back and hitting their opponents below the belt. It was, in short, a typical political meeting.

Returning home from that meeting, I pondered seriously the future of democracy in my country. I remembered that it had been the futility and corruption of the Italian parliament that paved the way for Mussolini, of the German parliament that paved the way for Hitler, of the French parliament that paved the way for Laval. And I wondered if the parliament of Canada and those of her nine provinces could point with justified pride to their own record of achievement, of honest government for the common weal, and could say with confidence, "It can't happen here." I was not too sure that they could.

For what does the citizen see as he watches the antics of his duly elected representatives? It is true that the picture is not entirely dark. A few of those representatives are genuine statesmen, bringing high intellectual and moral powers to the service of their country or province. These are the men who take their heavy responsibility seriously, who spurn as unworthy of them the party or personal self-seeking that the elector has learned to expect from politicians, who keep the wheels of government turning as well as they do. But the number of such men is pitifully small, and even they have at times to compromise with the forces of evil in order to remain in a position in which they can forward the common good.

What of the others? What of the ordinary run of the mill politician who shakes us by the hand and kisses our babies and joyously spends our taxes, usually on himself? What does the citizen see as he looks at this worthy

specimen? He sees a representative who does not represent; a man who, elected to serve in the public interest, gives some appearance of keeping an axe rather than his nose to the grindstone; a Little Jack Horner whose conception of public service is too often confined to the pulling of political plums from political pies; a performer who obediently jumps through a hoop when the party whip (revealing term!) does what men with whips usually do.

What does the citizen see as he watches his representatives "in solemn conclave met" and divided into two or more parties? He finds that the politician taken collectively is no more inspiring than the politician taken singly. He finds a group called the government which often makes a successful effort to do what it was elected to do, but sometimes devotes itself to consolidating its power by devious ways and, against the possibly evil day of the next election, making hay while the sun shines. He finds a group called the opposition, made up sometimes of one party and sometimes of several, which at times offers the government group genuine cooperation for the good of the country or province, but often spends its time and the taxpayers' money discrediting the government and automatically opposing any measure, good or bad, which the government advances simply because it is the government that advances it. The only difference the citizen can see between these two groups is the difference between two baseball teams; one side is in and is trying to stay in, the other side is out and is trying to get in. The game has already gone into extra innings, and the spectators are becoming impatient.

What difference does the participant in the game see between the two teams? If he belongs to one of the left wing parties he may see a genuine distinction between his group and that made up of the right wing parties. But if he belongs to one of the two older right wing parties, he needs sharper eyesight than that possessed by the ordinary citizen to see any difference between his party and the other. There was a day when the difference between Whig and Tory was a real difference, when each group represented a definite political philosophy and shaped its policies in accordance with that philosophy. But that day has passed, a fact to which the extinction of the Liberal party in Britain bears witness, and the

simultaneous existence in this country of the successors of the Whig and Tory parties has ceased to correspond to any reality. For what is the basis on which the young politician chooses one party or the other? Is he really convinced, after careful and impartial examination, that the outlook and the policies of one of these groups offer much better hope for good government than the outlook and policies of the other? The citizen doubts it, especially in view of the fact that almost the only outlook and the only policy he can see in either side is a firm determination to get as much power as it can and hold it as long as it can. What, in fact, does the young politician do? He may be a young lawyer, a member of a legal firm whose politics are fixed, traditionally, definitely, and irrationally. In that case he has no decision to make, and he joins one party or the other on the basis of a decision made by other men in other times under other circumstances. Such an entry into public life does not augur well for the future. If not already bound for such reasons, the hopeful young politician looks carefully around him, sizes up the situation, decides which way the cat will jump, and makes his decision accordingly. Such an entry into public life augurs even less well for the future.

And so the game goes on, and the citizen watches his country and her provinces treading the primrose path to political corruption, degradation, and extinction. "Whither democracy?" he wonders, and his wonder is tinged with fear. He execrates the politicians, the "potentates goodly in girth;" and, when he has finished, the politicians smile softly, pat their portly paunches, and continue to play politics. And then, if the citizen is an honest man, he examines his own conscience. He remembers that although it may not be universally true that people get the kind of government they deserve, in the long run there is a good deal of truth in the statement. He reminds himself that it was, after all, he and his fellows who elected the many politicians he blames and the few statesmen he should but probably does not praise. He asks himself whether he voted at the last election, and, if he voted, whether he voted as he did for the right reasons. He wonders whether he can acquit himself of the charges he brings against the representatives he has elected, and whether, if he were in their position, he would

be any less greedy and corrupt. He realizes that if the form of government we call democracy is to remain in existence, if the effort and sacrifice of a thousand years are not to be thrown thoughtlessly away, he, the ordinary citizen, must cleanse it of the impurities that have entered its system and must enable it to do the glorious work which it should and could do. And how will he bring about this consummation devoutly to be wished? By using all the influence he possesses to see that the right representatives are elected for the right reasons and that they do the right things after they have been elected; and, more specifically, by seeing that his own attitude and actions in the field of politics are above reproach.

Many of us citizens have in the past been guilty of gross neglect of civic duty in failing to exercise the franchise our forefathers purchased for us at so great a cost. Our indifference and laziness have sometimes allowed small but energetic groups, some of them with subversive tendencies, to exercise an influence on public affairs out of all proportion to their numerical strength. If only twenty percent of the voters bother to mark their ballots, and that is the sorry record of many parts of the country, the ones who do cast their votes are actually voting five times. When we neglect to vote we do not fail to express an opinion; we actually express someone else's opinion, the opinion of the man who took the trouble to vote. If we do not vote in an election we have no right to criticize the men who are elected. And the excuse that we don't know anything about politics is not good enough. It is our duty to know all that we can about politics, for politics is the science and art of securing the temporal common good of the whole body of citizens, and, since we belong to that body, we must contribute to its health and well-being. If we have failed in this duty in the past we must mend our ways immediately; and, if an election occurs before we have undertaken this study of politics, we can read the most impartial papers available and enquire about the candidates and the issues from people whom we know to be well informed on public affairs, and, without necessarily adopting their views, vote according to a conviction honestly formed. If we do not vote, we are to blame for the weaknesses of democracy.

Many other of us citizens are guilty of a far graver

crime against the state, a crime that amounts to treason—that of selling our vote. The less gross and obvious form of this crime consists in selling our vote to a politician who promises to spend public money on a usually useless piece of work that will increase the value of property which we happen to own or that will bring greater revenue, at the expense of the general body of citizens, to the community in which we happen to live. Even from the point of view of mere expediency this is poor policy, for the politicians often fails to keep his promise, and even if, with an eye to the future, he does keep it, we are the ones who pay the taxes that we have directed him to waste; we are being bribed with our own money. From the point of view of morality, such action deserves the greatest contempt and the severest punishment. The more gross form of this crime consists in selling our vote openly and unblushingly for a five dollar bill or a bottle of rum, the latter usually well watered. Again, in the long run, we provide the five dollar bill and buy the rum; we have sold our birth-right for a mess of pottage and then paid the bill ourselves. It is this kind of action that encourages the politician to be corrupt, that tells him we are interested not in good government but only in our own pockets, that increases on the body politic the festering sores that are gradually taking its life. If we sell our vote, we are to blame for the weaknesses of democracy.

Many more of us citizens are guilty of a much less reprehensible but often just as harmful form of neglect of civic duty. We vote for a man because he represents the party for which we have always voted, paying no attention to the man's fitness to represent us or to the policies to which his party stands pledged. Such an attitude is always stupid, and is generally bad in effect, though not in intention. At best it is based on unselfish admiration for and loyalty to the tradition inspired by a great leader of the past or present, a MacDonald or a Laurier, a Bracken or a King. Such loyalty is understandable and even admirable, but it is not intelligent. We give to a party the loyalty we should give to our country. At worst this attitude is based on a blind clinging to habit, and results in our voting for a particular party because our father and grandfather always voted for that party, for reasons which were probably no better than our own.

If we are blind and unreasoning party men, we are to blame for the weaknesses of democracy.

What, then, must we citizens do? We must keep ourselves well informed on the political situation, on the political needs of our country and province. When an election is held we must vote, and we must vote for the right reasons. That means that we must not sell our vote. It also means that we must vote for a candidate because we consider him an honest and able man and a worthy representative of our constituency, or because his party is pledged to policies that we consider beneficial to our country or province. It means that we must break the power of the party machine over us, a power that now condemns any independent candidate to the almost inevitable losing of his deposit. It means that we must be not Liberals or Conservatives but citizens. It means that we must vote for the man or the policy, and not for the bribe or the party. It means, in a word, that we must realize, and act on the realization, that citizens of a democracy have duties as well as rights. This is the challenge that the times present to us. Are we big enough to meet it?

—H. L. Johnston.

MORE NEWS FROM OVERSEAS

(The following is an excerpt from a letter received from Alphonsus Campbell, '37, who has been overseas for quite some time as Supervisor of Knights of Columbus huts—Ed.)

When we began our rapid advance through Sicily in July, we naturally found the people, the language, and the country strange. With my knowledge of French and Latin, however, I did not find the language difficult and was soon able to read it without much trouble. The first thing to strike me was the profusion of printed signs and slogans on walls, houses, stone fences,—everywhere. Along the new highways huge signs proclaimed, "IL Duce a Noi," "Viva IL Duce" (IL Duce, he is our man, Long Live IL Duce); these were placed there by Mussolini himself, probably when he opened the new highways.