

## Democracy in Eclipse

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As early as the second century B.C., the oft-quoted Roman poet Terence wrote: "Quot homines, tot sententiae"—so many men, so many minds. That thought, uttered over twenty-two centuries ago, is the only excuse and the only authority offered for inflicting on the unsuspecting readers of this twenty-fifth anniversary number of *Red and White*, one more article upon the much-discussed and time-worn subject of government.

The word democracy,—rule of the people, comes from the Greek words "demos,"—the people, and "kratein,"—to rule. It therefore stands as the name of the form of government in which the power rests with the body of the governed. It is in opposition to monarchy,—the rule of one; to aristocracy,—the rule of the "best," or nobles; and to oligarchy,—the rule of the few. In the words of Abraham Lincoln, it purports to be "government of the people, by the people, and for the people," as opposed to government by a single chief, a dominant class, or a masterly few.

Contrary to popular opinion, democracy was a great force in the ancient world, but we must remember that it then had certain characteristics which very clearly distinguish it from its modern forms. In antiquity the democracy was limited to a single city with a few miles of surrounding territory. In three countries of the ancient world men did succeed in reaching the stage of a settled and constitutional political life. There were the Phoenicians at Carthage, there were the people of Rome, and there were the Greeks. But Athens and Rome in the height of their power had fewer free citizens than an ordinary Canadian constituency boasts of to-day. At Carthage the government was nearer an oligarchy than a democracy, and although there were popular elements in the Roman assemblies which passed the laws and chose the magistrates, yet, we can hardly consider the Roman constitution democratic. It is really only the Greek democracies that deserve the name.

Another salient feature of the ancient democracy was the existence of a great number of slaves who had no political, and few civil, rights; that is, a large and im-



portant part of the population was not reckoned among the citizens at all. It must also be kept in mind that representative government as we have it to-day, was then unknown; indeed, it was superfluous where all the citizens could meet in one spot to discuss public affairs. "It does not appear to have entered the thoughts of any among the many Greek philosophers and Constitution framers," writes Viscount Bryce in "Modern Democracies."

All these ancient republics also lacked many other features found in modern free governments. Historians tell us that there were no proper judicial systems, no regular civil service, no permanent military establishment, no organized political parties, little or no interest in, or importance attached to, elections to office, and no check on the actions of the ruling assemblies. In summing up a study of the Greek republics, Bryce writes: "Two facts stand out prominently to the modern historian when he surveys these republics from afar: One is this:—They reached in an early stage of the political development of mankind the high water mark in the uncontrolled sovereignty of the people and in the rule of the Average Man. The other fact is that after all the changes and vicissitudes of seventy-five generations, the tendencies of human nature remain substantially what they were then. Short indeed, was the life of these republics, but it was intense and it was wonderfully fruitful for all later generations. . . . . What would the democracy of Athens have become had its quality been tested by another two centuries of life? Unhappily, the drama was never played out. After the first three acts, in the first of which Solon, in the second, Pericles, and in the third, Phocion and Demosthenes played the leading parts, the curtain suddenly fell. The military monarchy of Macedonia, reared by the craft of Philip, and thereafter wielded by the resistless force of Alexander, cut short the free life of Athens, and although the famous city continued as a foremost seat of instruction for many years, the day of the great statesmen, great poets, and great philosophers was gone forever."

In the so-called republic proclaimed at Rome five centuries before the Christian era, the political power at first was entirely in the hands of the patrician families, with the Senate chosen from that body, while the plebians were forever struggling to wrest a share of the political



power from them. They gradually did succeed in acquiring a certain control over the Senate by the *Tribunes of the People*. But the conquered nations were not governed democratically; they were administered and exploited as satrapies. In those great struggles that went on in Rome between the privileged and the proscribed, it may be interesting to note, that there were features very similar to those exhibited by modern forms of democracy. Caesar and Pompey, in the later years of the Republic had organized political "machines" that were more efficient and corrupt than Tammany Hall has ever been even in the days of its most notorious bosses. The masses in Rome had votes, but they were ignorant and poverty stricken; they could be amused and distracted by shows and gladiatorial combats, their cries could be stilled by the corn dole, and Caesar and Pompey, as too many of their present-day imitators saw to it that only those who voted as they directed should receive the dole.

For several centuries after the fall of Rome, there was little or no place in the world for democracy. Other forces, however, were at work. Christianity with its new doctrine of brotherhood, its sense of love and pity, had brought into being an idea unknown in the pagan world, the idea of man's inherent dignity and importance. The Church, moreover, in its many difficulties with the absolute rulers of the times, seldom failed to champion the cause, and second the efforts, of the common people, in their struggles for justice and liberty. In support of this fact,—so consistently kept in the background in all our school history texts, we need but refer in British history, to the reign of King John, where we find the name of Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, the first in the list of subscribing witnesses to Magna Carta.

The fierce political and military struggles of the past three centuries, however, have been the chief factors in the rise to power of Modern Democracy. The stages of the long conflict between the people at the bottom and the privileged classes at the top were especially marked by the wars of the Netherlands against Spain and the rise of the Dutch Republics; the British revolutions of 1642 and 1688; the war of American Independence in 1776; the French revolution of 1789, the complementary revolutions of 1830 and 1848; and the various revolutions in Europe since 1900. It was the English revolutions of



1642 and 1688 that consolidated parliamentary government. For, after all, it was not in Greece or Rome, but in England, that the vitally important principle of representative government, that modern essential of democracy, was born. When it was found that distance and numbers made it impossible for all the subjects of one state to meet together to debate new laws and national policy, or to vote the sums required for the work of government, the expedient was devised that the citizens of each town or county should meet together locally and appoint representatives armed with full powers to attend a central parliament and bind their constituents to concur in what might be there determined. Without this invention, modern democracy fraught with its immense possibilities for good and evil, could never have been born. This, then, would seem to be Great Britain's outstanding contribution to the cause of popular government, and although, a few years ago, in the United States, it was ardently hoped that such additional devices as the *direct primary*, the *referendum*, and the *recall* would make the machinery of democratic government more efficient and more responsive to the popular will, yet, these have come and gone leaving scarcely a wrack behind, while, in all those countries that still pretend to maintain democratic institutions, the principle of responsible government according to the British idea is more strongly entrenched than ever. Indeed, it would seem that this "principle" is the *sine qua non* of modern democracy.

However, in spite of all these momentous struggles, the way of democracy has been extremely difficult and progress has been painfully slow. A century and a quarter ago, therefore, with the exception of tiny oases here and there, nowhere in Europe could the people be said to rule. At that time Great Britain enjoyed far wider freedom than any part of Continental Europe, and yet, all her local as well as her central government was still highly oligarchic. When, in 1783, the framers of the Constitution of the American Republic began to search history for material for their epoch-making undertaking, they were forced to go back to the writings of Aristotle (384-322 B. C.) and of Plutarch (46-120 A.D.). Truly, an illuminating commentary on the processes of government during more than twenty centuries!

But, within the century that lies immediately behind



us, what amazing changes have passed over the political world! Practically all the absolute monarchies of the Old World have become democracies. No less than twenty republics have sprung up in the Western hemisphere. At the outbreak of the Great War there were in the world more than one hundred parliamentary assemblies at work, legislating for self-governing communities. With minor variations here and there, the typical modern state was ruled under the direction of a parliament which was elected by the people; the decisions of a majority, among the voters and in the parliament, were accepted as conclusive and binding upon all, until a majority for a different policy was obtained. There was liberty of person, of thought, of the press; religious toleration was the general rule; individual citizens could not be arrested or punished except by due process of law. That was democracy as understood twenty years ago. During the nineteenth century, therefore, it had spread over the greater part of the world. Russia, Germany, Austria, Japan, still had their emperors, but in those countries too, representative institutions had been established. Even in such backward empires as Turkey and China, the old autocrats had been ousted and parliaments had been set up. Indeed, so universal was the acceptance of the doctrine of democracy, that the Allies in the Great War waged their final victorious campaign to President Wilson's battle cry of "Making the World safe for Democracy." Under the shock, empires were dismembered, more than a dozen dynasties were overthrown, and numerous republics were set up. Suffrage was extended not only to all men but also to women. Never, in the history of the human race, had there been more voting! It then seemed that the whole world had, finally, and for all time, adopted the doctrine of democracy.

But, alas! what tremendous upheavals and what a rude awakening since the world-wide economic crash of 1929! In the last week of February of the present year, the Manchester Guardian, the oracle of democracy in Great Britain, published a notably significant manifesto signed by a large number of the most prominent people of the country, including not only Labor party men, but also many leading Liberals and Conservatives. This manifesto was virtually an S.O.S. call to all the faithful to rally immediately to the support of "Democracy,"



whose existence was once more at stake; and this in the country which we have all along looked upon as the stronghold of democracy,—the mother of parliament! In Russia, a Dictatorship of the proletariat has virtually discarded both constitutional and personal liberty. In Italy, Austria, Turkey, Yugo-Slavia, Poland, Germany, Persia, powerful individuals have established what we now call "authoritarian" governments. In almost all other countries, ominous rumblings are heard which augur ill for representative institutions. In 1931, Great Britain granted to her executive, known as the National Government, powers more drastic and more absolute, than ever before entrusted to any representative body in times of peace; while in the United States, by the election of President Roosevelt, in November, 1932, that country, the first in the world to adopt unrestricted manhood suffrage, virtually created the greatest political and economic dictatorship the world has ever known. In France, right up to the verge of the bloody riots of February sixth last, nobody would have conceded that the temper of the people held any real danger for the existing regime, and yet, on the following morning, a legislator, going about his business, and venturing on foot among a crowd gathered on the Place de la Concorde, was recognized, chased and unmercifully beaten by the enraged populace. "But, I have done nothing," he cried with indignation. "Vous êtes parlementaire," came the accusing and sinister explanation from the horde. Indeed, ever since the accession of the Nazis to office in Germany, France has been the last great power of Continental Europe in which a certain measure of individual liberty and freedom of expression has been possible. Across the Rhine and across the Alps, the press, like the people, has been nationalized; schools, the cinema, the radio, have all become exclusive and powerful organs of "authoritarian" government propaganda. Swift, often drastic, punishment descends upon adverse critics of the existing order. Whether any part of Europe was made safe for "Democracy" by the World War, or all of it made ripe for dictatorship, is surely a very debatable question at the present moment. Even nearer home, in our own Dominion of Canada and in some of our Provinces of the West, the powers actually enjoyed by the executives are nothing short of absolute. It is of course true that in the latter cases, these extraordinary



powers were granted voluntarily and not through military force or intimidation, nevertheless, the fact remains that democracy stands self-confessed as a failure in the present momentous crisis, and as an instrument of government it may be said virtually to have abdicated. Indeed, throughout the whole world, the political trend is unmistakably in the direction of dictatorships. Everywhere, thoughtful men are asking: "Can Democracy survive?"

In the words of the Manchester Guardian manifesto already alluded to, "the world is once more confronted by a wave of violence in political thought and action. Organizations of a semi-military character have grown in some countries into vast private armies which have usurped the functions of government. The Communists are not less militant in their language and speak and write in terms of revolutionary violence. Moreover, Fascists and Communists alike pour scorn upon democratic institutions and advocate their displacement by dictatorial methods. Even among the orthodox political parties there is a disposition to evade parliamentary control instead of insisting upon the improvement of parliamentary procedure." Everywhere, therefore, parliamentary government is challenged and, with its back to the wall, is waging what, in the eyes of spectators, looks like a losing battle.

How then account for what seems, in the eyes of so many, this obvious failure of democratic institutions? Machiavelli, one of the shrewdest of men, with one of the most acute minds that the world has known, used to remark that Democracy cannot long exist anywhere in the world; that as a mode of national management or administration it involves an impossibility, and after a little while it must end in wreck. To him it is a clear truth; he considers it a solecism in politics that the universal mass of men should ever be able to govern itself. He admits that the Romans maintained a sort of democracy for a long time, but he believes that it was purely in virtue of this item in their constitution, namely; of their having the conviction in their minds that it was solemnly necessary at times, to appoint a dictator; a man who had the power of life and death over every one, who degraded men out of their places, ordered them to execution, and did whatever seemed to him good in the name of the God above; and Machiavelli calculated that that was the thing which purified the social system from time to time, and enabled



it to continue as it did. Lycurgus the great Grecian lawgiver, was once asked when he intended to establish a democracy in Sparta. The answer to his interlocutor was characteristic. It was: "When you establish one in your own household." George Bernard Shaw, in one of his periodic tirades against existing institutions and in his own cynical way, says of Democracy: "It is idle to expect the audience to run the show." Innumerable other writers, both ancient and modern, could be cited who have spoken in the same strain. And yet, with all due respect to the achievements of these great intellects, may we not suggest that their analogies are not strictly exact, and does not the experience of mankind as mirrored in the pages of history give the lie to those assertions? Indeed, have not democratic governments given to the world the only periods of true freedom which humanity has yet enjoyed?

It is no doubt true that democracy, like all other human institutions, has its defects, but what of the defects of the alternative which is being so sedulously and persistently advocated? Now, no one will deny that the success of dictatorship depends almost entirely upon the personality of the dictators. A vigorous, honest, far-seeing leader established in power, may administer his country's affairs with high efficiency and confer upon it many *material* benefits. But how secure equal capacity and integrity in his successor? History shows that in almost every instance, the "great" man is followed by a "little" man who brings ruin and desolation upon all the institutions of his country. Then, once more begins that long, slow, painful ascent of humanity towards democracy and freedom. No more salient and persistent fact stands out in greater relief from the pages of history; indeed, its repetition has become a commonplace in every school-room in the land. But apparently, men never will learn from the sad and painful mistakes of their predecessors; only experience makes them wise. Perhaps they are now expecting to see arise that perfectly wise and perfectly good "despot," such as the world has never seen, except in that white-haired king of Browning's, who

"Lived long ago  
In the morning of the world,  
When Earth was nearer Heaven than now."



In a recent number of the *Contemporary Review* Sir Herbert Samuel writes the following pertinent lines:

"To confess one's own inaptitude for political liberty is one thing; to draw from that the conclusion that liberty has no value for others, who may have reached a higher stage of development, is another. Let those accept the rule of dictators who feel incompetent to rule themselves. That is their affair. But let them not pretend, in order to cloak their failure, that they are really in possession of some nobler philosophy of their own. Let them not try to persuade us that it is finer to be led blindfolded than to walk by one's own vision."

Popular sovereignty has not procured the results so confidently expected of it by its protagonists, for various reasons. In the first place, democracy has been called upon to bear a load greater than it can ever sustain. It has been overweighted from the very beginning, and secondly it has been corrupted by privilege. In the beginning people proceeded on the assumption that government is unlimited in scope, whereas common sense tells us that it is strictly limited. "Pass a law," that was the remedy which suggested itself to the average citizen for every ill of the body politic. In almost every case, if the promoter was insistent enough, the law was passed; in many cases this law failed to work; it refused to give the longed-for results. Soon, therefore, this monumental faith in government possibilities waned, petered out, almost completely disappeared. To-day, the average citizen has gone to the other extreme; he looks down upon representative government, laughs at its repeated failures, derides its seemingly helpless efforts.

Again, the whole modern economic system is one of privilege. Representative government from its very inception has been bound up with it. To-day practically every member of parliament and every senator is not only a representative of "the people," as he should be, but he is especially and before everything else, the representative of some special interest, some monopoly, some big business, some financial corporation, seeking government favors. And so we have the not very edifying spectacle of members and senators of wheat, pulp, lumber, hydro-electric power, railroads, banks, insurance companies, and what not. The result of all this has been, in the words of Pope Pius XI's great encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*: "a struggle



for dictatorship in the economic sphere itself; then, the fierce battle to acquire control of the State, so that its resources and authority may be abused in the economic struggles; finally the clash between States themselves." And in all this terrific contest which has been carried on for several decades, the "people" have stood idly aloof, while privilege ruled triumphant and rode rough-shod over their liberties.

"Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." It is very much to be feared, however, that that most essential principle has always been honored much more in the breach than in the observance. Common sense tells us that the chief requirement of any well ordered society is that the people composing it should "care." Look around and see for yourself how much they "do" care. Their attitude towards political corruption and privilege is one of cynical indifference, and towards economic and government problems an uninquiring ignorance. Men get eloquent over automobiles, radios, and especially the latest hockey or baseball game, but when tariff is mentioned, when downright theft of our great natural resources is mentioned, when inefficiency and corruption in public office is mentioned, they will mumble a few commonplace or stupid shibboleths borrowed from the political platform of the political party to which they happen to belong,—usually because of family tradition, and then they hastily drop the discussion.

Nor does your average college or university graduate differ greatly from this. Government and the problems of government have not been his forte. Elections to him stand about on the same level as football or hockey. That these elections should turn upon matters of real import to the nation, that there are grave problems which need solution, and that government is the only agency that can solve them,—these considerations are among the least of his worries. His "politics" in which he exhibits a quite childish pride, is gloriously free from any attempt to get down to effective thinking.

The philosophy of present day writers on government and on political economy should be of some help to us in our perplexity, but here again, we are not likely to find much light. These writers have very little use for moral principles; there are no moral principles at all for most of them. The Decalogue is just an elastic yardstick



which may be stretched to almost any length; they talk of pragmatism, behaviorism and a hundred other "isms," but that there are moral laws to which human conduct must conform or suffer the consequences, well, we hear very little about that. "So democracy drifts a derelict on the political sea."

And yet it would be very shortsighted judgment to conclude that the task is as simple as ridding the government of coarse graft, crude incompetence, and distressing disorganization. The real problem is immeasurably more complicated and difficult, for it goes down to the depths of the moral, social and economic life of the people. Government corruption, and incompetence, and lack of direction and vision, are not comprehensible away from the social and economic environment of which they form a part. Graft must be paid by some one outside the government equally at fault with the official or executive. If the competent and efficient and honest people are not to be found in the government but outside, then they must have been attracted by superior social or economic advantages. Therefore, the extravagance, corruption, and inefficiency of governments are not so much causes as symptoms of what is going on in the life of the nation, and by the same logic, are curable, not by surface remedies, but by more basic changes.

The whole political and economic breakdown is due to our moral breakdown. We seem to be everywhere on the run down hill. Everywhere, indeed, there has been a certain decline in respect for authority, law and order. The old principle of "every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost" which has been so faithfully worshipped in these latter days, has indeed played us scurvy tricks. This has been abundantly proved by the sad consequences that have followed from the free rein given to these dangerous individualistic ideals. We should have known this all along, for is not this individualistic philosophy the direct antithesis of the teachings of Christianity? Surely then, the hopelessness of trying to find any plan for a better order of society or method of attaining it outside of God, must now be patent to every Christian, and we must be drawn to the conclusion and the confident conviction that a God-centered and a God-guided life, nation, or world, is the only and the very abundant solution to all our problems.



Therefore it follows clearly, in the words of the now famous encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*: "If we examine matters diligently and thoughtfully, we shall perceive clearly that this longed-for social reconstruction must be preceded by a profound renewal of the Christian spirit, from which multitudes in every country have unhappily departed. Otherwise all our endeavours will be futile, and our social edifice will be built not upon a rock, but upon shifting sand. . . . . If society is to be healed now, in no way can it be healed save by a return to Christian life and Christian institutions, for Christianity alone can supply an efficacious remedy for the excessive solicitude for transitory things, which is the origin of all vices. And who will say that this remedy is not urgently needed by society today? For what will it profit men that a more prudent distribution and use of riches make it possible for them to gain even the whole world, if thereby they suffer the loss of their own souls? What will it profit to teach them sound principles in politics and economics, if they permit themselves to be swept away by selfishness, by unbridled and sordid greed, that: "having the Commandments of the Lord, they do all things contrary?"



They never taste who always drink;  
They always talk who never think.

—Prior.

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In the adversity of our best friends we often find something which does not displease us.—*La Rochefoucauld*

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The extreme pleasure we take in talking of ourselves should make us fear that we give very little to those who listen to us—*La Rochefoucauld*.

