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PRESENT TENDENCIES IN AMERICAN POLITICS[1]

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For the first time since its sessions began in 1904, the American Political Science Association was last year unable to hold its regular annual meeting. For fourteen years, in unbroken series, the association had brought its members together for conference and discussion; but last year, with more matter in its field engaging thought and provoking study than ever before, the association had to suspend its activities. This was due to circumstances so well known that the matter would be scarcely worth mentioning were it not that it exhibits a plight in which political science is apt to find itself whenever the ordinary course of events is interrupted by some great catastrophe.

In President Lowell's standard work on *Governments and Parties in Continental Europe*, he remarks that to him "the State sometimes presents itself under the figure of a stage-coach with the horses running away. On the front a number of eager men are urging the most contrary advice on the driver, whose chief object is to keep his seat; while at the back a couple of old gentlemen with spy-glasses are carefully surveying the road already traversed." In this picture, drawn by one who is himself an

[1] Presidential address at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Cleveland, Ohio, December 29, 1919.

eminent political scientist, no one can mistake the position assigned to political science. Its occupation is that of the old gentlemen with the spy-glasses. Carrying on the metaphor, one might say that what happened last year to prevent the usual exchange of notes and observations was an upset of the stage-coach, scattering passengers, spilling goods, and making it the first thought with everyone to jump in to save life and property. In this emergency the members of this association were not found wanting. Their ordinary pursuits as students of political science might be suspended, but not their activities as publicists, and their special knowledge and experience were applied to public service in many ways of marked usefulness. Indeed, it is the most hopeful and encouraging incident of that great wreck of civilization in which the world is now floundering that it revealed as never before the new and great resources which the state has acquired through the progress of science and the amassing of expert knowledge n our colleges and universities. Never before has the practical value of educational foundations been so impressively exhibited as by their manifold services during the great war.

But now that the war is over, or at least has dwindled so that it now continues only in particular spots; now that the main task is to clear away the wreck and put things in running order again, what help can political science give in this emergency? To begin with, it has in stock much useful information about forms of government, principles of organization, systems of jurisprudence. The old gentlemen with the spy-glasses have noted much on the road that civilization's stage-coach has already traversed. Their notes and observations have been digested in innumerable treatises. But it may be asked how much of such matter is available for instruction and guidance in the new era upon which the world has entered? For the most part the literature of political science is historical and descriptive. It gives accounts of what has been and what is; but does such knowledge throw much light on what will be? To go at once to the heart of the matter, is political science any better able now than it was in 1787 to answer the important question

which Alexander Hamilton put in the first number of *The Federalist:* "whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force?" Hamilton observed that "it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example," to decide that question, so that "a wrong election of the part we shall act may deserve to be considered as the general misfortune of mankind."

There was at one period an enthusiastic belief that in the Constitution of the United States reflection and choice had at last superseded accident and force, and that a model of free government was now provided by which all countries and peoples might benefit. The effect upon governmental arrangements was once very marked, but complete examination of the documents shows that this influence soon spent itself, and a decided change of disposition took place. If, for instance, one shall attentively consider the constitutional documents of all the Americas, one will observe, that although in their early forms the Constitution of the United States was the model, this is no longer the case. The constitution of the French republic now excels it in influence. The United States has lost its lead, despite the fact that never has our country bulked larger in the world than now. The present situation is indeed a striking confirmation of Hamilton's opinion that error in our republic becomes the general misfortune of mankind, for it is a fact well known to every student of politics that a belief that our system of government is a failure on the essential point of justice is now a potent influence on the side of social revolution throughout the world. Everywhere the leaders of revolt point to the United States as an example of bourgeois rule and as an evidence of its congenital inability to deal fairly with the masses. Goldsmith's definition of a republic as a country in which the laws govern the poor and the rich govern the laws expresses a view now widely prevalent.

It is not possible that any form of government can be so good as to escape calumny or be able to rule at all times merely by reason and by moral influence; but the case becomes very serious,

the danger of revolution really formidable, when the activity of revolutionists draws support from the calm investigations of impartial students. It is unfortunately the case—and it is a fact that it would be unwise to ignore—that the most important and influential studies that have been made of the institutions of the United States show an increasing spirit of depreciation. Students of political science will generally agree that the three greatest works of this class, all displaying wide knowledge and deep thought, are De Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, first published in 1835; Bryce's *American Commonwealth*, 1888; and Ostrogorski's *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties*, 1902. These works form a crescendo of censure upon American government, each reëxamination of the subject confirming previous disapproval and adding to it.

Profound disappointment over results in the United States is undoubtedly a mighty factor in the strong reaction going on against representative government. It is not merely a hole-and-corner sentiment such as the police force can be trusted to suppress; it is a large movement receiving active intellectual support. Everyone who keeps in touch with current literature knows and can mention periodicals of high critical pretensions that have gone over to it. Serious and thoughtful books are appearing with arguments in favor of substitutes for representative government, and advocating new methods of political organization, which, whether that term be employed or not, are decidedly of the soviet pattern. Even such institutions as the Carnegie and Rockefeller foundations, whose origin and management would naturally incline them to conservative views, have been constrained by the results of dispassionate inquiry, to put forth severe indictments of the present system of government. The old veneration for the Constitution, that used to be such a strong American characteristic, has been much impaired.

In my own experience as a teacher—which from what I hear from colleagues is not singular in this respect—a marked change has taken place in the attitude of Young America. Most of our students seem to stick to the opinions they learned at home, in politics as in religion; but there are some ardent, hopeful, active

spirits who take an independent interest in political affairs, and these used to attach themselves with enthusiasm to the cause of civil service reform. Now, they are more likely to take up socialism, and no feature of its propaganda seems to please them more than the contempt and derision it pours upon legislative procedure. Karl Marx's scathing denunciation of what he called parliamentary cretinism is eliciting a response that can scarcely fail to have practical consequences.

This brings us face to face with a very important consideration. What is the matter with political science if it may serve to undermine institutions of government? Has it no settled criteria of political value, no methods of analysis by which it can accurately discern the causes of bad government and prescribe the means of cure? Can it, in fine, be anything more than a branch of history? Can it really maintain pretensions to rank as a genuine science of political institutions, enlightening and directing the arts of practical statesmanship?

After making all the deductions and allowances that candor requires, I think that there is good ground for the assertion that political science is not merely historical, but is a genuine science in that it can supply plain interpretation, clear foresight, and practical guidance to those who consult it. The state of political science may be fairly compared with that of medical science. The one has much the same relation to the body-politic that the other has to the physical body. The field of each science is a hunting ground for quackery and charlatanry; in the case of each the application of well-established principles is obstructed by ignorance and cupidity. But these defects in the situation do not alter the fact that a genuine body of scientific knowledge does exist, and that the real problem is not to supply knowledge but to make available the existing supply. Political science, like medicine, is a progressive science; but in each case actual attainments are immensely in advance of their practical application. The prevalence of typhoid fever and smallpox in American communities does not discredit medical science. It knows just what to do to banish such ailments if allowed to act; the difficulty is not to find out what to do, but it is to obtain means

of doing what ought to be done. Much the same may be said of political science with regard to problems in its field.

It may be laid down as a general principle that when great corrections and improvements are made in the organization of public authority they are accomplished by extending opportunity to political science. The master achievements of statesmanship when closely examined will be found to consist not in devising new principles but in providing means for making known principles available. Napoleon Bonaparte did not himself draft the code that goes by his name, but he made arrangements by which juristic reformers could apply their science to institutions. The present constitution of English city government sprang from the scientific labors of the municipal corporations commission of 1833. The present constitution of Canada sprang from the Durham report of 1839, which was an embodiment of ideas and principles of responsible government that previously had been unable to obtain authoritative expression.

To take a signal instance from our own history, exact inquiry will show that the long, miserable delay in effecting currency reform was not due to lack of scientific knowledge but to the covert legislative influence of particular interests so circumstanced as to be as naturally opposed to reform as peddlers of well water would be to the introduction of a public system of water supply. The passage of the Federal Reserve Act was notoriously the result of such a vigorous exertion of presidential influence as to secure legislative attention to scientific advice. It is, in fine, the law of political progress that sound developments are the result of administrative initiative guided by scientific knowledge. When difficult situations arise in government it generally appears that the main trouble is in the matter of power to act and not through insufficiency of knowledge. If this be true, it follows that political science ought to be able to tell what is the matter with representative government that so strong a popular reaction should be going on against it. I venture to say that political science can do that very thing.

Much obscurity still surrounds the origin and development of representative government, but its nature and requirements

are so accurately known that the cause and cure of the diseases from which it is now suffering have long since been fully stated. In proof of this I need cite only one work, John Stuart Mill's treatise on *Representative Government.* Did time permit it would be possible to show in detail how its analysis explains our present troubles, although the work was published fifty-eight years ago. But all the present occasion warrants is a brief statement of general principles.

The existence of elective assemblies does not necessarily supply representative government or even tend in that direction. It is a commonplace of history that the people of Europe were rescued from the manifold oppressions of feudalism by the development of absolute monarchy; but it is not sufficiently remarked that this was a popular process. The diets, parliaments and assemblies that abounded in the Middle Ages were regarded by the people as organs of class privilege and rapacity, and hence the people energetically supported any movement to wipe them out. Far from absolutism being the result of royal usurpation, kings were simply dragged along by the force of the movement. Powers were forced upon them that they were reluctant to accept. Striking instances of this appear when details are examined. The text has been preserved of an address made to the king of France in 1412, by a national assembly, in which profiteers were denounced, the king was blamed for inaction, and a blunt demand was made that he should seize and use absolute power. At the meeting of the States-General in 1614, the *parlement* of Paris, with the support of the Third Estate, declared it to be a fundamental law that the throne was absolutely independent, though the king himself demurred to a principle that ignored the privileges of the clergy and the nobles. When absolute power was conferred upon the king of Denmark in 1660, he at first refused to accept it, but the burghers closed the gates of the city to keep the nobles from leaving the Diet to collect their forces, and carried their point by sheer intimidation. No fact of European history is better established than that absolute monarchy was erected by public opinion and its burden of responsibility was forced upon kings by the insistence of the

people. If there is now an extensive revolt of popular sentiment against legislative assemblies, it is no new thing, but is the revival of a feeling that was for centuries the strongest political force.

At present representative government is the dominant type of polity. It has spread not only through the western world but also it has been extensively adopted in the East, whose peoples are still taking it up with an enthusiasm that creates some troublesome administrative problems for imperial authority. Today, representative government is probably the most widely diffused political form the world has ever known. If it can be made effective in distributing justice and maintaining order civilization will at last become general throughout the world, instead of subsisting only in particular areas as heretofore. The prospect is so attractive that one is apt to overlook the fact that the ascendancy of representative government is too recent to warrant entire confidence in its permanence. It is a product of the nineteenth century, prior to which representative government was peculiar to England and its offshoots. Probably English success in the Napoleonic wars was the master influence in quelling the old antipathy to legislative assemblies and starting the tide of sentiment in favor of parliamentary institutions which swept over Europe, reshaping all constitutions. But most of them do not date farther back than 1848, so that sufficient time has not elapsed to advance them beyond the experimental stage, and meanwhile it is manifest that there has been some revival of the old antipathy. The cause now is the same as the cause then—belief that institutions purporting to exist for the public welfare are really agencies of private interest and class advantage.

In such a situation, as Mill points out, "the only fruit produced by national representation is, that in addition to those who really govern, there is an assembly quartered upon the public, and no abuse in which a portion of the assembly is interested is at all likely to be removed." That is to say, representative government may assume such a character as to become wholly a nuisance, and this despite the fact that it is apparently

open to the control of public opinion through popular election of representatives. Matters may be so arranged that elections can do no more than make changes among the players in the same old game. The result then illustrates the French proverb that the more change you have the more you get of the same thing. Whichever party wins at the polls, jobbery in office and traffic in legislation will still continue. Party succession then tends to form what in European politics is known as the *Rota,* and in American politics as machine rule. The great consideration then will be not what will benefit the people, but what will please the districts, and cadging for patronage and sparring for points in the electioneering game will become the principal occupation of legislative bodies. To each party it will then appear to be the matter of greatest importance not to allow the other party credit for any achievement, and mutual rivalry in specious claims will give inexhaustible volubility and interminable duration to debate, making it a source of bewilderment rather than enlightenment.

There is no greater fallacy in government than that of electing good men to office. American experience abundantly attests the truth of Mill's observation that "unless a man is fit for the gallows, he is thought to be about as fit as other people for almost anything for which he can offer himself as a candidate." The only real security is by establishing such conditions that whoever is elected, good or bad, will have to behave himself properly. History affords no instance in which a representative assembly has been actually disposed to represent the people if the members are allowed to help themselves to offices and appropriations, and choose for themselves what business they will consider.

Mill clearly points out the serious maladies to which representative government is peculiarly susceptible, and anyone who consults his chapters on the proper functions of representative bodies, and the infirmities and dangers to which representative government is liable, will find that they accurately describe conditions from which American politics now suffer acutely. At the same time, he holds that the ideally best form of government

is representative government. How then are we to distinguish between genuine and spurious forms of representative government? The criteria he mentions may be summarized as follows:

1. There must be direct connection between the executive department and the representative assembly. The proper function of a representative assembly is to exercise control over the government in behalf of the people. It is a board of directors whose business is to keep the administration steadily confronted with its responsibilities. The directors cannot do this intelligently unless the administration is present at their meetings. Who would expect honesty and efficiency in a business corporation in which the board of directors and the executive management were separate, rival concerns, each trying to master the other, and each appealing to the shareholders against the other. Either this situation must be corrected or the business will collapse. This risk to the Constitution of the United States is distinctly pointed out in Justice Story's *Commentaries*, published in 1833.

2. The representative assembly must have no access to official patronage or to the public treasury. The members must be placed under such conditions that they will be personally disinterested in such matters. Then and then only will they act as an organ of control. It is only when representatives are so situated that they have no power to vote to their own use offices and appropriations that they will be vigilant to see that those who do make appointments and propose appropriations shall not be excessive in their demands. If, of its own motion, the executive makes all appointments without confirmation or ratification by any other authority, the representative assembly is then naturally impelled to restrict executive opportunity by economical appropriations. But if the representatives have any means of sharing the appointing power the tendency then is to multiply the offices and resist economy. How great a difference this makes may be observed by comparing the budget of any English legislative body with that of any American legislative body. In the one case the cost of a legislative session is only from five to ten per cent of what it is in the other case. It would be absurd

to impute such a constant result to personal quality of membership. It is obviously a result of system. It is just as marked in the Barbados assembly, representing an electorate in which negroes greatly outnumber the whites, as in the English house of commons.

The matter of cost is, however, trivial in comparison with the effect upon the transaction of public business. When the distribution of patronage is solely an executive function in which the representatives have no participation, a prompt consequence is clear and exact accountancy. Administrative behavior is then subjected to such jealous scrutiny that it becomes an urgent matter of administrative convenience to present budget statements with such orderly classification and in such minute detail that they speak for themselves. I do not know of any American public document that can match in lucidity and comprehensiveness the Blue Book annually laid before the Barbados assembly, which shows what good system can accomplish even under electoral conditions usually regarded as adverse to good government. This is a matter in which anyone can judge for himself who will take the trouble to examine the documents, which are to be found in a number of our public libraries.

But the effect of legislative patronage in producing loose and disorderly accounts, although a grave constitutional defect, is less serious than its effect in deteriorating legislative behavior. When members are in a position to get offices and appropriations for their districts they are, willy-nilly, forced to accept the occupation of party employment agents and district solicitors, converting legislative procedure into a scuffle of local agency, and turning representative government into a spoils system. That is the true explanation of the constitutional decay that is now manifesting itself in connection with representative government.

In addition to these criteria of genuine representative government, Mill lays down the principle that a representative assembly is by its proper nature unfit to attend to details of legislation, and that it should be restricted to acceptance or rejection of legislative projects in their entirety as prepared and submitted by the executive administration. This will be recognized as a principle

ordinarily adopted in the conduct of private business corporations. Instead of mulling over details and attempting to tinker proposals into satisfactory shape, a sensible board of directors will leave such matters to the executive management, and if it fails to give satisfaction the proper thing to do is to change the management. That some restraint upon the lawmaking activities of representative assemblies would be desirable is a thought that must often occur to one in considering the appalling volume of crude and unintelligible legislation dumped into the statute books of this country every year. Experience, however, has shown that this is a matter which takes care of itself when a genuine form of representative government is established. The situation then is such that criticism of measures becomes the most advantageous way of obtaining personal distinction, and a disposition is created in favor of putting upon the administration the work of preparing and presenting bills.

This tendency has attained its most extensive development in Switzerland where without any formal restriction of the right of individual members to introduce bills, it has become the practice to leave all bill drafting to the administration, and it has become customary for the administration to publish in advance of a session the measures it intends to submit. Should the administration fail to present a measure for which there is demand, the usual expedient is a resolution calling upon it to prepare one for consideration. Although the Swiss Congress alters and amends in its discretion, in that matter too it makes use of the administration, which retains charge of the bill and shapes its language in accord with the decisions reached. It is obvious that such a system not only precludes lobby manipulation of the terms of enactments but it also standardizes the language of the laws, making them so clear and intelligible that questions of intention and significance do not occupy the time of the courts. The community is thus spared the torment and expense which result from obscurity and inconsistency in the laws.

If these considerations are well founded, the true cause of the present discontents is not the failure of representative government but the actual lack of it. The people resent the imposture

by which constitutional sanctity is claimed for methods and practices that violate the essential character of representative government. This is an era of unrest and desire for change all over the world, but it is quite noticeable that respect for existing institutions corresponds to the actual value of their representative character. It is notorious that the spirit of revolt is less powerful in English self-governing commonwealths than it is in countries that have adopted English parliamentary institutions without the safeguard of the English budget system. It is least powerful in Switzerland where the representative system is most effectively established. It is vain to expect that the present discontents can be removed merely through sermonizing and patriotic expostulation, so long as defects are allowed which mar the representative character of the actual system of government. To those who put their trust in penal legislation and police activity, I would say with Edmund Burke: "Reflect seriously on the possible consequences of keeping in the hearts of your community a bank of discontent, every hour accumulating, upon which every company of seditious men may draw at pleasure."