

THE RECENT STRUGGLE FOR PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION IN GREAT BRITAIN

British political life resists cleansing with all the vigour of a dirty little boy. It is nothing to your politician that the economic and social organization of all the world, is strained almost to the pitch of collapse, and that it is vitally important to mankind that everywhere the whole will and intelligence of the race should be enlisted in the great tasks of making a permanent peace and reconstructing the shattered framework of society. These are remote, unreal considerations to the politician. What is the world to him? He has scarcely heard of it. He has been far too busy as a politician. He has been thinking of smart little tricks in the lobby and brilliant exploits at question time. He has been thinking of jobs and appointments, of whether Mr. Asquith is likely to "come back" and how far it is safe to bank upon L. G. His one supreme purpose is to keep affairs in the hands of his own specialized set, to keep the old obscure party game going, to rig his little tricks behind a vast, silly camouflage of sham issues, to keep out able men and disinterested men, the public mind, and the general intelligence, from any effective interference with his disastrous manipulations of the common weal.

I do not see how any intelligent and informed man can have followed the recent debates in the House of Commons upon Proportional Representation

without some gusts of angry contempt. They were the most pitiful and alarming demonstration of the intellectual and moral quality of British public life at the present time.

From the wire-pullers of the Fabian Society and from the party organizers of both Liberal and Tory party alike, and from the knowing cards, the pothouse shepherds, and jobbing lawyers who "work" the constituencies, comes the chief opposition to this straightening out of our electoral system so urgently necessary and so long overdue. They have fought it with a zeal and efficiency that is rarely displayed in the nation's interest. From nearly every outstanding man outside that little inner world of political shams and dodges, who has given any attention to the question, comes, on the other hand, support for this reform. Even the great party leaders, Mr. Balfour and Mr. Asquith, were in its favour. One might safely judge this question by considering who are the advocates on either side. But the best arguments for Proportional Representation arise out of its opponents' speeches, and to these I will confine my attention now. Consider Lord Harcourt--heir to the most sacred traditions of the party game--hurling scorn at a project that would introduce "faddists, mugwumps," and so on and so on--in fact independent thinking men--into the legislature. Consider the value of Lord Curzon's statement that London "rose in revolt" against the project. Do you remember that day, dear reader, when the streets of London boiled with passionate men shouting, "No Proportional Representation! Down with Proportional Representation"? You don't. Nor do I. But what happened was that the guinea-pigs and solicitors and nobodies, the party hacks who form the bulk of London's

misrepresentation in the House of Commons, stampeded in terror against a proposal that threatened to wipe them out and replace them by known and responsible men. London, alas! does not seem to care how its members are elected. What Londoner knows anything about his member? Hundreds of thousands of Londoners do not even know which of the ridiculous constituencies into which the politicians have dismembered our London they are in. Only as I was writing this in my flat in St. James's Court, Westminster, did it occur to me to inquire who was representing me in the councils of the nation while I write....

After some slight difficulty I ascertained that my representative is a Mr. Burdett Coutts, who was, in the romantic eighties, Mr. Ashmead-Bartlett. And by a convenient accident I find that the other day he moved to reject the Proportional Representation Amendment made by the House of Lords to the Representation of the People Bill, so that I am able to look up the debate in Hansard and study my opinions as he represented them and this question at one and the same time. And, taking little things first, I am proud and happy to discover that the member for me was the only participator in the debate who, in the vulgar and reprehensible phrase, "threw a dead cat," or, in polite terms, displayed classical learning. My member said, "Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes," with a rather graceful compliment to the Labour Conference at Nottingham. "I could not help thinking to myself," said my member, "that at that conference there must have been many men of sufficient classical reading to say to themselves, 'Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes.'" In which surmise he was quite right. Except perhaps for "Tempus fugit," "verbum sap.," "Arma virumque," and "Quis custodiet," there is no

better known relic of antiquity. But my member went a little beyond my ideas when he said: "We are asked to enter upon a method of legislation which can bear no other description than that of law-making in the dark," because I think it can bear quite a lot of other descriptions. This was, however, the artistic prelude to a large, vague, gloomy dissertation about nothing very definite, a muddling up of the main question with the minor issue of a schedule of constituencies involved in the proposal.

The other parts of my member's speech do not, I confess, fill me with the easy confidence I would like to feel in my proxy. Let me extract a few gems of eloquence from the speech of this voice which speaks for me, and give also the only argument he advanced that needs consideration. "History repeats itself," he said, "very often in curious ways as to facts, but generally with very different results." That, honestly, I like. It is a sentence one can read over several times. But he went on to talk of the entirely different scheme for minority representation, which was introduced into the Reform Bill of 1867, and there I am obliged to part company with him. That was a silly scheme for giving two votes to each voter in a three-member constituency. It has about as much resemblance to the method of scientific voting under discussion as a bath-chair has to an aeroplane. "But that measure of minority representation led to a baneful invention," my representative went on to say, "and left behind it a hateful memory in the Birmingham caucus. I well remember that when I stood for Parliament thirty-two years ago we had no better platform weapon than repeating over and over again in a sentence the name of Mr. Schnadhorst, and I am not sure that it would

not serve the same purpose now. Under that system the work of the caucus was, of course, far simpler than it will be if this system ever comes into operation. All the caucus had to do under that measure was to divide the electors into three groups and with three candidates, A., B., and C., to order one group to vote for A. and B., another for B. and C., and the third for A. and C., and they carried the whole of their candidates and kept them for many years. But the multiplicity of ordinal preferences, second, third, fourth, fifth, up to tenth, which the single transferable vote system would involve, will require a more scientific handling in party interests, and neither party will be able to face an election with any hope of success without the assistance of the most drastic form of caucus and without its orders being carried out by the electors."

Now, I swear by Heaven that, lowly creature as I am, a lost vote, a nothing, voiceless and helpless in public affairs, I am not going to stand the imputation that that sort of reasoning represents the average mental quality of Westminster--outside Parliament, that is. Most of my neighbours in St. James's Court, for example, have quite large pieces of head above their eyebrows. Read these above sentences over and ponder their significance--so far as they have any significance. Never mind my keen personal humiliation at this display of the mental calibre of my representative, but consider what the mental calibre of a House must be that did not break out into loud guffaws at such a passage. The line of argument is about as lucid as if one reasoned that because one can break a window with a stone it is no use buying a telescope. And it remains entirely a matter for speculation whether my member is arguing that a

caucus can rig an election carried on under the Proportional Representation system or that it cannot. At the first blush it seems to read as if he intended the former. But be careful! Did he? Let me suggest that in that last sentence he really expresses the opinion that it cannot. It can be read either way. Electors under modern conditions are not going to obey the "orders" of even the "most drastic caucus"--whatever a "drastic caucus" may be. Why should they? In the Birmingham instance it was only a section of the majority, voting by wards, in an election on purely party lines, which "obeyed" in order to keep out the minority party candidate. I think myself that my member's mind waggled. Perhaps his real thoughts shone out through an argument not intended to betray them. What he did say as much as he said anything was that under Proportional Representation, elections are going to be very troublesome and difficult for party candidates. If that was his intention, then, after all, I forgive him much. I think that and more than that. I think that they are going to make party candidates who are merely party candidates impossible. That is exactly what we reformers are after. Then I shall get a representative more to my taste than Mr. Burdett Coutts.

But let me turn now to the views of other people's representatives.

Perhaps the most damning thing ever said against the present system, damning because of its empty absurdity, was uttered by Sir Thomas Whittaker. He was making the usual exaggerations of the supposed difficulties of the method. He said English people didn't like such "complications." They like a "straight fight between two men." Think of

it! A straight fight! For more than a quarter-century I have been a voter, usually with votes in two or three constituencies, and never in all that long political life have I seen a single straight fight in an election, but only the dimmest sham fights it is possible to conceive. Thrice only in all that time have I cast a vote for a man whom I respected. On all other occasions the election that mocked my citizenship was either an arranged walk-over for one party or the other, or I had a choice between two unknown persons, mysteriously selected as candidates by obscure busy people with local interests in the constituency. Every intelligent person knows that this is the usual experience of a free and independent voter in England. The "fight" of an ordinary Parliamentary election in England is about as "straight" as the business of a thimble rigger.

And consider just what these "complications" are of which the opponents of Proportional Representation chant so loudly. In the sham election of to-day, which the politicians claim gives them a mandate to muddle up our affairs, the voter puts a x against the name of the least detestable of the two candidates that are thrust upon him. Under the Proportional Representation method there will be a larger constituency, a larger list of candidates, and a larger number of people to be elected, and he will put 1 against the name of the man he most wants to be elected, 2 against his second choice, and if he likes he may indulge in marking a third, or even a further choice. He may, if he thinks fit, number off the whole list of candidates. That is all he will have to do. That is the stupendous intricacy of the method that flattens out the minds of Lord Harcourt and Sir Thomas Whittaker. And as for the working of it, if you

must go into that, all that happens is that if your first choice gets more votes than he needs for his return, he takes only the fraction of your vote that he requires, and the rest of the vote goes on to your Number 2. If 2 isn't in need of all of it, the rest goes on to 3. And so on. That is the profound mathematical mystery, that is the riddle beyond the wit of Westminster, which overpowers these fine intelligences and sets them babbling of "senior wranglers." Each time there is a debate on this question in the House, member after member hostile to the proposal will play the ignorant fool and pretend to be confused himself, and will try to confuse others, by deliberately clumsy statements of these most elementary ideas. Surely if there were no other argument for a change of type in the House, these poor knitted brows, these public perspirations of the gentry who "cannot understand P.R.," should suffice.

But let us be just; it is not all pretence; the inability of Mr. Austen Chamberlain to grasp the simple facts before him was undoubtedly genuine. He followed Mr. Burdett Coutts, in support of Mr. Burdett Coutts, with the most Christian disregard of the nasty things Mr. Burdett Coutts had seemed to be saying about the Birmingham caucus from which he sprang. He had a childish story to tell of how voters would not give their first votes to their real preferences, because they would assume he "would get in in any case"--God knows why. Of course on the assumption that the voter behaves like an idiot, anything is possible. And never apparently having heard of fractions, this great Birmingham leader was unable to understand that a voter who puts 1 against a candidate's name votes for that candidate anyhow. He could not imagine any feeling on the part of the voter that No. 1 was his man. A vote is a

vote to this simple rather than lucid mind, a thing one and indivisible.

Read this--

"Birmingham," he said, referring to a Schedule under consideration, "is to be cut into three constituencies of four members each. I am to have a constituency of 100,000 electors, I suppose. How many thousand inhabitants I do not know. Every effort will be made to prevent any of those electors knowing--in fact, it would be impossible for any of them to know--whether they voted for me or not, or at any rate whether they effectively voted for me or not, or whether the vote which they wished to give to me was really diverted to somebody else."

Only in a house of habitually inattentive men could any one talk such nonsense without reproof, but I look in vain through Hansard's record of this debate for a single contemptuous reference to Mr. Chamberlain's obtuseness. And the rest of his speech was a lamentable account of the time and trouble he would have to spend upon his constituents if the new method came in. He was the perfect figure of the parochially important person in a state of defensive excitement. No doubt his speech appealed to many in the House.

Of course Lord Harcourt was quite right in saying that the character of the average House of Commons member will be changed by Proportional Representation. It will. It will make the election of obscure and unknown men, of carpet-bag candidates who work a constituency as a hawker works a village, of local pomposities and village-pump "leaders" almost impossible. It will replace such candidates by better known and

more widely known men. It will make the House of Commons so much the more a real gathering of the nation, so much the more a house of representative men. (Lord Harcourt's "faddists and mugwumps.") And it is perfectly true as Mr. Ramsay Macdonald (also an opponent) declares, that Proportional Representation means constituencies so big that it will be impossible for a poor man to cultivate and work them. That is unquestionable. But, mark another point, it will also make it useless, as Mr. Chamberlain has testified, for rich men to cultivate and work them. All this cultivating and working, all this going about and making things right with this little jobber here, that contractor there, all the squaring of small political clubs and organizations, all the subscription blackmail and charity bribery, that now makes a Parliamentary candidature so utterly rotten an influence upon public life, will be killed dead by Proportional Representation. You cannot job men into Parliament by Proportional Representation. Proportional Representation lets in the outsider. It lets in the common, unassigned voter who isn't in the local clique. That is the clue to nearly all this opposition of the politicians. It makes democracy possible for the first time in modern history. And that poor man of Mr. Ramsay Macdonald's imagination, instead of cadging about a constituency in order to start politician, will have to make good in some more useful way--as a leader of the workers in their practical affairs, for example--before people will hear of him and begin to believe in him.

The opposition to Proportional Representation of Mr. Sidney Webb and his little circle is a trifle more "scientific" in tone than these naive objections of the common run of antagonist, but underlying it is the

same passionate desire to keep politics a close game for the politician and to bar out the politically unspecialized man. There is more conceit and less jobbery behind the criticisms of this type of mind. It is an opposition based on the idea that the common man is a fool who does not know what is good for him. So he has to be stampeded. Politics, according to this school, is a sort of cattle-driving.

The Webbites do not deny the broad facts of the case. Our present electoral system, with our big modern constituencies of thousands of voters, leads to huge turnovers of political power with a relatively small shifting of public opinion. It makes a mock of public opinion by caricature, and Parliament becomes the distorting mirror of the nation. Under some loud false issue a few score of thousands of votes turn over, and in goes this party or that with a big sham majority. This the Webbites admit. But they applaud it. It gives us, they say, "a strong Government." Public opinion, the intelligent man outside the House, is ruled out of the game. He has no power of intervention at all. The artful little Fabian politicians rub their hands and say, "Now we can get to work with the wires! No one can stop us." And when the public complains of the results, there is always the repartee, "You elected them." But the Fabian psychology is the psychology of a very small group of pedants who believe that fair ends may be reached by foul means. It is much easier and more natural to serve foul ends by foul means. In practice it is not tricky benevolence but tricky bargaining among the interests that will secure control of the political wires. That is a bad enough state of affairs in ordinary times, but in times of tragic necessity like the present men will not be mocked in this way. Life is

going to be very intense in the years ahead of us. If we go right on to another caricature Parliament, with perhaps half a hundred leading men in it and the rest hacks and nobodies, the baffled and discontented outsiders in the streets may presently be driven to rioting and the throwing of bombs. Unless, indeed, the insurrection of the outsiders takes a still graver form, and the Press, which has ceased entirely to be a Party Press in Great Britain, helps some adventurous Prime Minister to flout and set aside the lower House altogether. There is neither much moral nor much physical force behind the House of Commons at the present time.

The argument of the Fabian opponents to Proportional Representation is frankly that the strongest Government is got in a House of half a hundred or fewer leading men, with the rest of the Parliament driven sheep. But the whole mischief of the present system is that the obscure members of Parliament are not sheep; they are a crowd of little-minded, second-rate men just as greedy and eager and self-seeking as any of us. They vote straight indeed on all the main party questions, they obey their Whips like sheep then; but there is a great bulk of business in Parliament outside the main party questions, and obedience is not without its price. These are matters vitally affecting our railways and ships and communications generally, the food and health of the people, armaments, every sort of employment, the appointment of public servants, the everyday texture of all our lives. Then the nobody becomes somebody, the party hack gets busy, the rat is in the granary....

In these recent debates in the House of Commons one can see every stock

trick of the wire-puller in operation. Particularly we have the old dodge of the man who is "in theory quite in sympathy with Proportional Representation, but ..." It is, he declares regretfully, too late. It will cause delay. Difficult to make arrangements. Later on perhaps. And so on. It is never too late for a vital issue. Upon the speedy adoption of Proportional Representation depends, as Mr. Balfour made plain in an admirable speech, whether the great occasions of the peace and after the peace are to be handled by a grand council of all that is best and most leaderlike in the nation, or whether they are to be left to a few leaders, apparently leading, but really profoundly swayed by the obscure crowd of politicians and jobbers behind them. Are the politicians to hamper and stifle us in this supreme crisis of our national destinies or are we British peoples to have a real control of our own affairs in this momentous time? Are men of light and purpose to have a voice in public affairs or not? Proportional Representation is supremely a test question. It is a question that no adverse decision in the House of Commons can stifle. There are too many people now who grasp its importance and significance. Every one who sets a proper value upon purity in public life and the vitality of democratic institutions will, I am convinced, vote and continue to vote across every other question against the antiquated, foul, and fraudulent electoral methods that have hitherto robbed democracy of three-quarters of its efficiency.