VOTING WITH A YAWN

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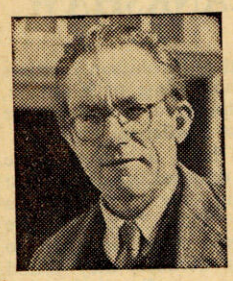
By Michael Foot



The Party System has been attacked ever since British political parties were born. In this article, the first of three on the causes of Parliament's decline in public prestige, Michael Foot argues that while the Party System is still the essence of our Parliamentary democracy, it has developed faults which must be corrected if Parliament is to play its proper part in the nation's life.

A CURSE on party politics; "a plague on both your houses"; a growing cynicism about Parliament itself: these associated ideas have provided, I believe, the dominant mood in British politics over recent years. If the belief is correct, it might be expected that the politicians themselves would show signs of alarm. If the disagreeable taste of fish became a general topic of conversation, the fishmongers would display some interest. But politicians of all parties, it seems, require a more persuasive proof of their unpopularity than a sharp fall in sales or a boycott at the shops.

M. Poujade or Mr. Gladstone?

Whatever excuses may be made by the Conservative and Labour machines, the decline in the votes cast for both the major parties, combined with the considerable increase in the Liberal vote at many by-elections, has been the principal landmark on the electoral scene since 1955. Whatever boasts may be made by the Liberals, few will suppose that the signs of their recovery in the national affections have been due to dynamic Liberal leadership in the Commons or the cleansing astringency of the policy they present in the country. Revulsion against the two-party ascendancy is the one cry which unites the Radical remnants, the Conservative Bonham-Carters and those newer recruits into the party who appear to derive their moral inspiration more from M. Poujade than Mr. Gladstone.

Even in the 1955 election itself the main feature of the contest—and, incidentally, the main probable cause of the Tory victory—was the extra million and a half of the bored or the bewildered who stayed at home in addition to the small percentage of the public who did not use their votes in 1951. Most of the signs point to an equally tepid and timorous affair in 1959.

Complacent Faith of Politicians

Of course, the politicians may readily convince themselves that the disease is no more than skin-deep. By-elections are notoriously fickle and misleading guides to what may happen at a General Election. And the British public, however peppery and peevish in revealing its political temper, is none the less polite. Very few brickbats are thrown; a well-directed tomato aimed at even the most obscure back-bencher would make the national headlines. So the average M.P. is still able to visit his constituency amid an aura of prestige and self-importance. He is still able to assume that the reputation of Parliament is unimpaired and that, even in the age of the H-bomb and the Sputnik, the party system will be sustained according to the old, unruffled rules.

Moreover, there is another and more substantial reason for the complacent faith of professional politicians. Disgust with party politics and occasional revolts against the apparent follies and hypocrisies which the system entails have occurred ever since British political parties were born. The great satirists from Jonathan Swift to Bernard Shaw have unleashed their bitterest scorn against it—without avail. If the system was tough enough to survive such onslaughts, why should modern politicians fear the callow attacks of Angry Young Men or Aldermaston marchers?

In the year 1911—a date when, looking back, we imagine that British Parliamentary institutions were at the peak of their virility—Hilaire Belloc delivered a famous broadside. "The object of this book," he wrote in his preface to "The Party System," "is to support the tendency now everywhere apparent and finding expression, a tendency to expose and ridicule as it deserves, to destroy and to supplant the system under which Parliament, the governing institution of this country, has been rendered null."

Greatest Issues Excluded

To clinch that indictment, he listed a whole series of complaints with a modern tang—the collusion between the two Front Benches; the extermination of independent judgment; the readiness to exclude all the greatest issues from party combat on the grounds of being "above party"; the attempt to tighten party discipline and thus encourage a show of bickering on minor matters while the real clash on major issues was softened to the point of insignificance by all manner of secret compacts and contrivances.

Belloc omitted hardly a single item on the charge-sheet. Yet not a ripple was left on the surface of British politics. One of his contemporaries, Augustine Birrell, told a story of an ancient dandy in London, who, taking one sunny afternoon his accustomed stroll down Bond-street, met an acquaintance hurrying in the direction of Westminster. "Whither away so fast this hot day?" murmured the dandy. "To the House of Commons," replied the friend, brushing past him. "What," said the dandy with a yawn, "does that go on still?"

Verdict of Three Authorities

Yes, in defiance of the Bellocs and the dandies and the yawns, the House of Commons still goes on. Only a fool would doubt its powers of endurance or the qualities which have enabled it to endure through two world wars and all the successive revolutions in Britain's status in the world. Indeed, if we accept the recent verdict of three eminent authorities—Lord Attlee, Mr. Herbert Morrison and Mr. Hugh Gaitskell—we must suppose that the British Parliamentary institution is well-nigh immaculate in its perfection.

In the pages they have written on the subject, no glimmer of sympathy is detectable for the contrary view that a ground-swell of opinion is mounting against the party system and its Parliamentary embodiment. Rather we must assume that an exactly proper balance has been struck between the ordered party discipline required for effective action and the new impetus which can come only from the exercise of free thought and free speech.

All of these authorities discount, if they mention them at all, the varied perils of oligarchy, caucocracy and corrupting power. Mr. Herbert Morrison has attempted the most elaborate description in his book "Government and Parliament." He portrays our present Governmental and Parliamentary machine in a state of blooming health. Considering that the book was published in 1954—three years after his own party had been defeated at an election directed by himself and barely a year before he was to be excluded from the leadership of the party he had served all his life—the tribute may be thought especially trustworthy. Only cranks and crabs, surely, will wish to pick holes in a coat of armour so shining and serviceable.

Voters Herded into Two Camps

Must we not therefore assume, from the politicians' own contentment with the instrument they manipulate, that the view of the critics is based on a grotesque misapprehension? If there is apathy and an unreadiness to recognise the spacious liberties now guaranteed to us, may the disgruntlement not be due to a surfeit of success rather than to any validity in the niggling charge of failure? The Emperor Augustus was confronted by the same ingratitude from the Romans. Perhaps, all unawares, we have been living through an Augustan age of English statesmanship.

But who will believe it? The voters, as we have seen, show in increasing numbers that they do not. Nor is the supposition about the untrustworthiness of by-election figures, however accurate, in any way creditable to the major parties. It is not a sound foundation for British democracy that millions of citizens should be herded into one of two camps against their inclination merely from an overriding distaste for the alternative.

Such a state of affairs saps the energetic support from a great section of the public which any Government needs and ought to be able to enlist. And that certainly, according to many witnesses, is what is happening. Never since 1945 have the ranks of the active workers in both the Conservative and Labour Parties been more depleted. In particular, all political parties, with the doubtful exception of the Liberals, have conspicuously failed to recruit an enthusiastic following among the young. The only movements of opinion which have touched the imagination of youth—the nuclear disarmament campaign is the primary example—take place outside any framework provided by the political parties.

Disraeli Would Have Been Horrified

And if a fish starts rotting at the head, may it not be that the conduct of Parliament has contributed to the malaise? Certainly it would be no tribute to Parliament to suppose that its demeanour has had little or no influence on the political temper of the country as a whole.

Has that demeanour been so impressive? Is there no basis for the suspicion that much of the fighting in the House of Commons has become a sham? And what conclusion is to be drawn from the curious remedy proposed in several quarters that more and more of the great issues of the age—foreign policy, defence, housing, education — should be raised above party? That cure would only deepen the disease. It would reduce party politics to a business of small change and trivial personalities.

It was not thus that Charles James Fox laid the foundations for a new Liberal Party in the days of the French Revolutionary Wars or that Gladstone made Midlothian a household word. Disraeli, from his opposite standpoint, would have been equally horrified at such a debasement of the role of party in our politics. "Above all," he said, "*above all*, maintain the line of demarcation between parties, for it is only by maintaining the independence of party that you can maintain the integrity of public men, and the power and influence of Parliament itself."

The conception of Parliament as a Council of State, turning up its nose at the vulgar antics of party conflict, may appeal to the politically illiterate editorial writers on our more sober Conservative journals. There is no support for it in British political tradition, and for a simple reason. For it means death to party politics and that in turn means death to democracy. Could there be a more pitiful irony than that Britain, in the midst of her engagement in a world-wide propaganda struggle against the evils of the one-party State, should smugly countenance the growth at her heart of one or other or both of the twin dangers which could destroy her case—a one-party State approved by apathetic consent and the decay of party politics which alone can provide the tolerable alternative. Either of these developments would deprive the citizen of the power of making an effective choice which is the essence of democracy.

Altogether, then, if there is a revolt against party politics and Parliament, the challenge cannot be dismissed as a trifle. And, even before the disease is diagnosed and the remedy sought, the first requirement is a robust repudiation of the sneers which have made "party" a dirty word in the political dictionary.

Conclusive Reply By Burke

The conclusive reply, in defence of party, to all the extreme individualists, all the champions of unfettered private judgment, all those who conceive of Parliament either as a Council of State or a deliberative assembly of anarchic little groups unwilling to stoop to the processes of compromise, was made by Edmund Burke in his "Thoughts on Our Present Discontents." "When bad men combine," he said, "the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle."

At once, in that first classical statement, Burke dealt with the claim that public men should rather be concerned to act according to their conscience on all issues and that party allegiance would interfere with this primary demand.

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At once, in that first classical statement, Burke dealt with the claim that public men should rather be concerned to act according to their conscience on all issues and that party allegiance would interfere with this primary demand.

"It is not enough in a situation of public trust in the Commonwealth," he said, "that a man means well to his country; it is not enough that in his single person he never did an evil act, but always voted according to his conscience. . . . This innoxious and ineffectual character, that seems formed on a plan of apology and disculpation, falls miserably short of the mark of public duty.

"That duty demands and requires that what is right should not only be made known but made prevalent; that what is evil should not only be detected, but defeated. . . . It is surely no very rational account of a man's life that he always acted right; but has taken care to act in such a manner that his endeavours could not possibly be productive of any consequence."

All virtue which is impracticable, said Burke, is spurious. "Public life is a situation of power and energy; he trespasses against his duty who sleeps upon his watch, as well as he who goes over to the enemy."

Thus the great Tory political philosopher presented the case which has been adopted by all succeeding party leaders of every colour. He bestowed his blessing on those—all the much-scorned partisan "activists"—who dare to descend into the mire of political campaigning, compromise, and manoeuvre. Often, too, his other most famous maxim—that an M.P. is not a delegate but a representative—is favourably quoted by Members of Parliament seeking to protect themselves from what they may regard as bullying pressure from their constituents.

Certainly Burke would be accepted both by the Morrisons and the Butlers, the Gaitskells and the Macmillans, as an unimpeachable authority. No man has ever held a more exalted view of the status of a Member of Parliament.

Servitude No Worthy Man Could Bear

But what would he say of their present manner of guarding the great heritage of the House of Commons and their present satisfaction with the way the system has been moulded in their hands? For Burke in some much less frequently quoted passages said much else. The great Tory philosopher was also a liberal.

"In order to throw an odium on political connections," he wrote, meaning by that term, of course, the party system, "these politicians (that is, the objectors to it) suppose it a necessary incident to it, that you are blindly to follow the opinions of your party, when in direct opposition to your own clear ideas; a degree of servitude that no worthy man could bear the thought of submitting to; and

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