

Erskine May, Vol. II, Chapter VIII, pp. 223-237

Significance of Party

Similarities and Differences Between the Parties

The fusion of parties, and concurrence or compromise of principles, was continued. In 1859, the Conservatives gave in their adherence to the cause of Parliamentary reform; and in 1860, the Liberal administration which succeeded them, were constrained to abandon it. Thirty years of change in legislation, and in social progress, had brought the sentiments of all parties into closer approximation. Fundamental principles had been settled: grave defects in the laws and constitution had been corrected. The great battle-fields of party were now peaceful domains, held by all parties in common. To accommodate themselves to public opinion, Conservatives had become liberal: not to outstrip public opinion, ultra-Liberals were forced to maintain silence, or profess moderation.

Among the leaders of the Conservatives, and the leaders of the ministerial Liberals, there was little difference of policy and professions. But between their respective adherents, there were still essential diversities of political sentiment. The greater number of Conservatives had viewed the progress of legislation,—which they could not resist,—as a hard necessity: they had accepted it grudgingly, and in an unfriendly spirit,—as defendants submitting to the adverse judgment of a court, whence there is no [224] appeal. It had been repugnant to the principles and traditions of their party; and they had yielded to it without conviction. 'He that consents against his will, is of the same opinion still;' and the true Conservative, silenced but not convinced by the arguments of his opponents and the assent of his leaders, still believed that the world was going very wrong, and regretted the good old times, when it was less headstrong and perverse.

On the other hand, the Liberal party, which had espoused the cause of liberty and progress from the beginning, still maintained it with pride and satisfaction,—approving the past, and hopeful of the future,—leading public opinion, rather than following it, and representing the spirit and sentiment of the age. The sympathies of one party were still with power, and immutable prescription: the sympathies of the other were associated with popular self-government, and a progressive policy. The Conservatives were forced to concede as much liberty as would secure obedience and contentment: the Liberals, confiding in the people, favoured every liberty that was consistent with security and order.

At the same time, each party comprised within itself diversities of opinion, not less marked than those which distinguished it from the other. The old constitutional Whig was more nearly akin to the Liberal Conservative than to many of his democratic allies. Enlightened statesmen of the Conservative connection had more principles in common with the bold disciples of Sir [225] Robert Peel than with the halting rear-rank of their own Tory followers.

Such diversities of opinion, among men of the same parties, and such an approach to agreement between men of opposite parties, led attentive observers to speculate upon further combination and fusion hereafter. A free representation had brought together a Parliament reflecting the varied interests and sentiments of all classes of the people; and the ablest statesmen, who were prepared to give effect to the national will, would be accepted as members of the national party, by whom the people desired to be governed. Loving freedom and enlightened progress, but averse to democracy, the great body of the people had learned

to regard the struggles of parties with comparative indifference. They desired to be well and worthily governed, by statesmen fit to accept their honourable service, rather than to assist at the triumph of one party over another.

Changes in Character of Parties

Having traced the history of parties,—the principles by which they were distinguished,—their successes and defeats,—their coalitions and separations,—we must not overlook some material changes in their character and organisation. Of these the most important have arisen from an improved representative system, and the correction of the abuses of patronage.

When parliamentary majorities were secured by combinations of great families, acting in concert with the crown, and agreeing in the constitution of the government, the [226] organisation of parties was due rather to negotiations between high contracting powers, for the distribution of offices, honours, and pensions, than to considerations of policy, statesmanship, and popularity.(1) The crown and aristocracy governed the country and their connections and nominees in the House of Commons were held to their party allegiance by a profuse dispensation of patronage. Men independent of constituents naturally looked up to the crown and the great nobles,—the source of all honour and profit. Long before the representation was reformed, the most flagrant abuses of parliamentary patronage had been corrected. Offices and pensions had been reduced, the expenditure of the civil list controlled, and political corruption in many forms abated.(2) But while a close representative system continued, parties were still compacted by family connections and interests, rather than by common principles and convictions. The Reform acts modified, but did not subvert, this organisation. The influence of great families, though less absolute, was still predominant. The constitution had been [227] invigorated by more popular elements: but society had not been shaken. Rank and ancestral property continued to hold at least their fair proportion of power, in a mixed government. But they were forced to wield that power upon popular principles, and in the interests of the public. They served the people in high places, instead of ruling them as irresponsible masters.

A reformed representation and more limited patronage have had an influence, not less marked, upon the organisation of parties, in another form. When great men ruled, in virtue of their parliamentary interest, they needed able men to labour for them in the field of politics. There were Parliaments to lead, rival statesmen to combat, foreign ministers to outwit, finances to economise, fleets and armies to equip, and the judgment of a free people to satisfy. But they who had the power and patronage of the crown in their hands, were often impotent in debate,—drivellers in council,—dunces in writing minutes and despatches. The country was too great and free to be governed wholly by such men; and some of their patronage was therefore spared from their own families and dependents, to encourage eloquence and statesmanship in others. They could bestow seats in Parliament without the costs of an election: they could endow their able but needy clients with offices, sinecures, and pensions; and could use their talents and ambition in all the arduous affairs of state. Politics became a dazzling profession,—a straight road to fame and fortune. It was the [228] day-dream of the first scholars of Oxford and Cambridge, Eton, Harrow, and Westminster. Men of genius and eloquence aspired to the most eminent positions in the government: men of administrative capacity, and useful talents for business, were gratified with lucrative but less conspicuous places in the various public departments. Such men were trained, from their youth upwards, to parliamentary and official aptitude; and were powerful agents in the consolidation of parties. Free from the intrusion of constituents, and the distractions and perils of contested elections, they devoted all their talents and energies to the service of their country, and the interests of their party. Lord Chatham, the brilliant 'cornet of horse,' owed the beginning of his great career to the mythical borough of Old Sarum. Mr. Burke was indebted to Lord Rockingham for a field worthy of his genius. William Pitt entered Parliament as the client of Sir James

Lowther, and member for the insignificant borough of Appleby. His rival, Mr. Fox, found a path for his ambition, when little more than nineteen years of age,(3) through the facile suffrages of Midhurst. Mr. Canning owed his introduction to public life to Mr. Pitt, and the select constituency of Newport. These and other examples were adduced, again and again,—not only before but even since the Reform act,—in illustration of the virtues of rotten boroughs. Few men would now be found to contend that such boroughs ought to have been spared: but it must be admitted that the [229] attraction of so much talent to the public service, went far to redeem the vices of the old system of parliamentary government. Genius asserted its mastery; and the oligarchy of great families was constrained to share its power with the distinguished men whom its patronage had first brought forward. An aristocratic rule was graced and popularised by the talents of statesmen sprung from the people. Nay, such men were generally permitted to take the foremost places. The territorial nobles rarely aspired to the chief direction of affairs. The Marquess of Rockingham was by his character and principles, as well as by his eminent position, the acknowledged leader of the Whig party, and twice accepted the office of premier: but the Dukes of Grafton and Portland, who filled the same office, were merely nominal ministers. The Earl of Shelburne was another head of a great house, who became first minister. With these exceptions, no chief of a great territorial family presided over the councils of the state, from the fall of the Duke of Newcastle in 1762, till the ministry of the Earl of Derby, in 1852.(4) Even in their own privileged chamber, eminent lawyers and other new men generally took the lead in debate, and constituted the intellectual strength of their order.

How different would have been the greatness and glory of English history if the nobles had failed to associate with themselves these [230] brilliant auxiliaries! Their union was a conspicuous homage to freedom. The public liberties were also advanced by the conflicts of great minds, and the liberal sympathies of genius.(5) But it must not be forgotten that the system which they embellished was itself opposed to freedom; and that the foremost men of the dominant party, during the reigns of the two last Georges, exercised all their talents in maintaining principles, which have since been condemned as incompatible with the rights and liberties of the people. Nor can it be doubted that without their aid, the aristocracy, whose cause they espoused, and whose ranks they recruited, would have been unable to hold out so long against the expanding intelligence, and advancing spirit of the times.

MPs Under the New System

The prizes of public life were gradually diminished: pensions and sinecures were abolished: offices reduced in number and emolument; and at length, the greater part of the nomination boroughs were swept away. These privileged portals of the House of Commons were now closed against the younger son, the aspiring scholar, and the ambitious leader of a university [231] debating club. These candidates were now supplanted by men of riper age,—by men versed in other business, and disinclined to learn a new vocation,—by men who had already acquired fame or fortune elsewhere,—by men to whom Parliament was neither a school nor a profession, but a public trust.(6) Such men looked to their constituents, and to public opinion, rather than to leaders of parties, of whose favours they were generally independent. In parties composed of such materials as these, the same discipline and unity of purpose could not be maintained. Leaders sought to secure the adherence of their followers, by a policy which they and their constituents alike approved. They no longer led regular armies: but commanded bodies of volunteers. This change was felt less by the Conservatives than by the Liberal party. Their followers sat for few of the large towns. They mainly represented counties, and boroughs connected with the landed interest: they were homogeneous in character, and comprised less diversities of social position and pretensions. Their confederation, in short, resembled that of the old regime. These circumstances greatly aided their cause. They gained strength by repose and inaction: while their opponents were forced to bid high for the support

of their disunited bands, [232] by constant activity, and by frequent concessions to the demands of the extreme members of their party. A moral cause also favoured the interests of the Conservatives. Conservatism is the normal state of most minds after fifty years of age,—resulting not so much from experience and philosophy, as from the natural temperament of age. The results of a life have then been attained. The rich and prosperous man thinks it a very good world that we live in, and fears lest any change should spoil it. The man who has struggled on with less success begins to weary of further efforts. Having done his best to very little purpose, he calmly leaves the world to take care of itself. And to men of this conservative age belongs the great bulk of the property of the country.

Whatever the difficulties of directing parties so constituted, the new political conditions have, at least, contributed to improved government, and to a more vigilant regard to the public interests. It has been observed, however, that the leading statesmen who have administered affairs since the Reform act, had been trained under the old organisation; and that as yet the representatives of the new system have not given tokens of future eminence. Yet there has been no lack of young men in the House of Commons. The Reform act left abundant opportunities to the territorial interest for promoting rising talent; and if they have not been turned to good account, the men, [233] and not the constitution, have been at fault. Who is to blame, if young men have shown less of ambition and earnest purpose, than the youth of another generation: if those qualified by position and talents for public life, prefer ease and enjoyment, to the labours and sacrifices which a career of usefulness exacts? Let us hope that the resources of an enlightened society will yet call forth the dormant energies of rising orators and statesmen. Never has there been a fairer field for genius, ambition, and patriotism. Nor is Parliament the only school for statesmanship. Formerly, it reclaimed young men from the race-course, the prize-ring, and the cockpit. Beyond its walls there was little political knowledge and capacity. But a more general intellectual cultivation, greater freedom and amplitude of discussion, the expansion of society, and the wider organisation of a great community, have since trained thousands of minds in political knowledge and administrative ability,—and already men, whose talents have been cultivated, and accomplishments acquired in other schools, have sprung at once to eminence in debate and administration. But should the public service be found to suffer from the want of ministers already trained in political life, leaders of parties and independent constituencies will learn to bring forward competent men to serve their country. Nor are such men wanting among classes independent in fortune, and needing neither the patronage of the great, nor any prize but that of a noble ambition.

Patronage Under the New System

It has been noticed elsewhere,(7) that while the [234] number of places held by members of Parliament was being continually reduced, the general patronage of the government had been extended by augmented establishments and expenditure. But throughout these changes, patronage was the mainspring of the organisation of parties. It was used to promote the interests, and consolidate the strength of that party in which its distribution happened to be vested. The higher appointments offered attractions and rewards to the upper classes, for their political support. The lower appointments were not less influential with constituencies. The offer of places, as a corrupt inducement to vote at elections, had long been recognised by the legislature, as an insidious form of bribery. But without committing any offence against the law, patronage continued to be systematically used as the means of rewarding past political service, and ensuring future support. The greater part of all local patronage was dispensed through the hands of members of Parliament, supporting the ministers of the day. They claimed and received it as their right; and distributed it, avowedly, to strengthen their political connection. Constituents learned too well to estimate the privileges of ministerial candidates, and the barren honours of the opposition; and the longer a party enjoyed power, the more extended became its influence with electors.

The same cause served to perpetuate party distinctions among constituent bodies, apart from varieties of [235] interests and principles. The ministerial party were bound together by favours received and expected: the party in opposition,—smarting under neglect and hope deferred,—combined against their envied rivals, and followed, with all the ardour of self-interest, the parliamentary leaders, who were denied at once the objects of their own ambition and the power of befriending their clients. Hence, when the principles of contending parties have seemed to be approaching agreement, their interests have kept them nearly as far asunder as ever.

The principle of competition, lately applied to the distribution of offices, threatened to subvert the established influence of patronage. With open competition, candidates owe nothing to ministers. In this way, the civil and medical services of India, the scientific corps of the army, and some civil departments of the state, were wholly lost to ministers of the crown. This loss, however, was compensated for a time by the limited competition introduced into other departments. There, for every vacancy, a minister nominated three or more candidates. The best was chosen; and, with the same number of offices, the patronage of the minister was multiplied. Two of his nominees were disappointed: but the patron was not the less entitled to their gratitude. He lamented their failure, but could not avert it. Their lack of proficiency was no fault of his.(8)

Conclusion

In the history of parties, there is much to deplore [236] and condemn: but more to approve and to commend. We observe the evil passions of our nature aroused,—'envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness.' We see the foremost of our fellow-countrymen contending with the bitterness of foreign enemies, reviling each other with cruel words,—misjudging the conduct of eminent statesmen, and pursuing them with vindictive animosity. We see the whole nation stirred with sentiments of anger and hostility. We find factious violence overcoming patriotism; and ambition and self-interest prevailing over the highest obligations to the state. We reflect that party rule excludes one half of our statesmen from the service of their country, and condemns them,—however wise and capable,—to comparative obscurity and neglect. We grieve that the first minds of every age should have been occupied in collision and angry conflict, instead of labouring together for the common weal.

But, on the other side, we find that government without party is absolutism,—that rulers, without opposition, may be despots. We acknowledge, with gratitude, that we owe to party most of our rights and liberties. We recognise in the fierce contentions of our ancestors, the conflict of great principles, and the final triumph of freedom. We glory in the eloquence and noble sentiments which the rivalry of contending statesmen has inspired. We admire the courage with which power has been resisted; and the manly resolution and persistence by which popular rights have been established. We [237] observe that, while the undue influence of the crown has been restrained, democracy has been also held in check. We exult in the final success of men who have suffered in a good cause. We admire the generous friendships, fidelity, and self-sacrifice,—akin to loyalty and patriotism,—which the honourable sentiments of party have called forth.(9) We perceive that an opposition may often serve the country far better than a ministry; and that where its principles are right, they will prevail. By argument and discussion truth is discovered, public opinion is expressed, and a free people are trained to self-government. We feel that party is essential to representative institutions. Every interest, principle, opinion, theory, and sentiment, finds expression. The majority governs: but the minority is never without sympathy, representation, and hope. Such being the two opposite aspects of party, who can doubt that good predominates over evil? Who can fail to recognise in party, the very life-blood of freedom?

Footnotes.

1. A spirited, but highly coloured, sketch of this condition of parties, appeared in Blackwood's Magazine, No. 360, p. 764. 'No game of whist in one of the lordly clubs of St. James's Square was more exclusively played. It was simply a question whether his grace of Bedford would be content with a quarter or a half of the cabinet; or whether the Marquess of Rockingham would be satisfied with two-fifths; or whether the Earl of Shelburne would have all, or share his power with the Duke of Portland. In those barterings and borrowings we never hear the name of the nation: no whisper announces that there is such a thing as the people; nor is there any allusion, in its embroidered conclave, to its interests, feelings, and necessities. All was done as in an assemblage of a higher race of beings, calmly carving out the world for themselves, a tribe of epicurean deities, with the cabinet for their Olympus.'
2. See supra, Vol. I. 369 et seq.; also, Chap. IV.
3. He was nineteen years and four months old, and spoke before he was of age.—Lord J. Russell's Mem. of Fox, i. 51.
4. Earl Grey was the acknowledged leader of the Whigs, irrespectively of his rank, which was scarcely that of a great territorial noble.
5. On the 29th March, 1859, Mr. Gladstone, in an eloquent speech upon Lord Derby's Reform Bill, asked. 'Is it not, under Providence, to be attributed to a succession of distinguished statesmen, introduced at an early age into this House, and, once made known in this House, securing to themselves the general favour of their countrymen, that we enjoy our present extension of popular liberty, and, above all, the durable form which that liberty has assumed?'—Hans. Deb., 3rd Ser., cliii. 1069. An able reviewer has lately said that 'historians will recognise the share which a privileged and endowed profession of politics had in the growth of English freedom and greatness, between the accession of the Hanoverian dynasty and the Reform Bill.'—Edinb. Rev., April 1861, p. 368.
6. It is by no means true that the general standard of instruction and accomplishment was superior under the system of nomination. Wraxall says: 'Mr. Pitt, who well knew how large a part of his audience, especially among the country gentlemen, were little conversant in the writings of the Augustan age, or familiar with Horace, always displayed great caution in borrowing from those classic sources.' . . . 'Barré usually condescended, whenever he quoted Latin, to translate for the benefit of the county members.'—Hist. Mem., iii. 318.
7. Vol. I. 164.
8. In 1870 open competition was extended to nearly all the other public departments.
9. 'The best patriots in the greatest commonwealths have always commended and promoted such connections. *Idem sentire de republicâ* was with them a principal ground of friendship and attachment: nor do I know any other capable of forming firmer, dearer, more pleasing, more honourable, and more virtuous habitudes.'—Burke's Present Discontents, Works, ii. 332.

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