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Democracy as a Form of Government

BY RIGHT HON. SIR JOHN SIMON,* K.C.V.O., P.C.

Gentlemen of the Canadian Club.—You really must allow me to begin by thanking you for the warmth of your welcome and by apologising for being the cause of bringing you together at so unusual an hour. It was an Oxford wit who wrote the well-known lines about that strange being who frequently breakfasted at 5 o'clock tea and dined on the following day. I have long known that the Canadian Club meets at lunch. It must be many a long day since the luncheon interval was so prolonged as it is to-night. But as I am leaving, to my great regret, the hospitable Dominion of Canada to-night, after a visit during which I have been travelling steadily at the average rate of 10 miles an hour night and day, and as I have had the great pleasure of meeting the Canadian Club as far east as Montreal and as far west as Vancouver, I could not resist the opportunity which you, sir, were so good as to offer me, of saying a few words here in Toronto before going home.

Now, gentlemen, there are many kinds of speaking. There is speaking because you are a member of a government and therefore have to defend it. There is speaking because you are a lawyer by trade and are being paid by a client to do it, but of all speaking the most cold-blooded speaking is the speaking which consists in getting up at the bidding of friends who have kindly gathered to hear you, with the instruction that you are to talk for not too long a time on any subject you please. I at any rate will observe the ordinary rules of prudence. I will carefully avoid making any observations connected, however remotely, with controversial politics in the old land at home. For although it is true my stay in the new world will not enable anybody to cancel an invitation to dinner, still the form in which vengeance may descend upon the

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head of an innocent pilgrim, desirous to amuse and instruct and not to vilify or mislead, is incalculable. And neither, gentlemen, will I approach a still more thorny subject, that of the politics of Canada. For I gather that you are about to enter a general election, and although I have made diligent enquiry in many sources, nobody can give me the tip as to who is going to succeed.

But it occurred to me that you would perhaps allow me for a very short time to-night to ask you to consider one or two of the salient features of democratic government as such. A trite topic! A boring topic! But a very important topic, and one which has been illuminated in a most remarkable volume written by the grand old man of political philosophy, Professor James Bryce. If I succeed in saying anything which is pointed and true on this subject now, I know very well it must be because I read his volumes as I was crossing the Atlantic.

Now, first of all, let us make a very necessary distinction. What is democracy, properly understood? For, as is often the case with these mouth-filling words, it is often used in a very incorrect sense. Democracy, properly understood, is that form of government in which the ruling power of the state is both legally vested and actually vested in the community as a whole. People sometimes talk as though the rule of the most numerous class or section in a community was democracy. It is nothing of the kind. It is one of the most odious forms of oligarchy. Democracy has nothing to do with the question as to where you will find the largest group of people of like mind, whether it be among those who work with their hands or those who work with their minds, or whether it be among the men or whether it be among the women. Democracy, in the world in which we live, a world where democracy must be a principle of government, democracy essentially means, not that any class, however great, powerful and important, should control the machinery of state as such, but that there should be political freedom in the sense that the ruling power of the state is, so far as political arrangements can secure it, put into the hands of the community as a whole. And I was careful to say that it is not enough that you should have this ruling power legally vested in the whole community. It is necessary that it should be really vested and exercised by the people as a whole.

For example, Germany! In the year 1913 and 1914 she was a state in which the choice of representatives in the Reichstag was exercised on the principle of manhood suf-

frage. If, for the moment, and only for the moment, we may exclude women, the arrangements by which the legislature of Imperial Germany was provided with members were as democratic as anything could be. Nevertheless, thinking of what we have been through during the last seven years, in no true sense was Imperial Germany democratic in 1913 and 1914. You may have all the machinery for manhood suffrage you please, but if you live in a community where the effective power over the instrument of government is really in the hands of a commission, or a set of men in control of an overriding army, you may use what words you please, but in any true sense the state in that condition is not democratic.

There are several reasons why we should be interested in this class of subject to-day. In the old land, from which I come, the gradual steps by which England has gained the right to call herself and to be called democratic can be traced over the centuries. Here in this Canada of yours the steps have been so quickly taken that within the memory of a single generation you have sprung like Minerva from the brain of Jove, fully armed as a democratic nation, and whether the process is a slow, or, as in your case, a rapid one, there is something exhilarating, which stirs the blood, in establishing the basis of a democratic government, so that one is tempted to dream dreams and see visions as to what democratic government can do.

Consider the situation which is disclosed by the history of the United States of America. There was a country which owes more to the influence of constructive ideas, a devotion to political fellowship, a sentiment for the rights of man, insisting upon the abstract principles which lay at the bottom of independence, than to anything else. We of the British stock who have remained British have really got a rather different attitude towards political questions. We are less theoretical and I am inclined to think we are rather more practical. It was stated by Edmund Burke in his great speech delivered in the House of Commons for the conciliation of England with America that these Americans, whose character he described, had got so quick an ear and so sharp a sense for the suspicion of a wrong that they actually, as he put it, sniffed the injury in the distance with every passing breeze. Whereas Edmund Burke said and said truly of those who still preserve the older traditions that they lived in a more hand-to-mouth way; were willing to accept institutions as they were, and only altered them according as they felt that there was real solid grievance to be redressed by practical measures. I must confess that as

a result of my journey and the many friendships and acquaintances I have had the good fortune to make during the last few weeks that I go back to the old land feeling very strongly how deep the sentiment is between the citizens of the old country from which I sprung and this new Canada of yours. I do not see that you are being influenced by merely theoretic arguments. I think I trace in my fellow subjects here in Canada just the same practical view of the problems of the time, a desire to solve each one of them as it comes along with good temper and good feeling, as distinguished from some high theoretic view which attempts to forecast the future and provide for a situation which certainly cannot well be described—this mental attitude I find here as in the old land. It is only the surface which to the wayfarer looks strange—newspaper head-lines so enormous I don't know where to begin to read them, railway trains where you always have to keep the window shut, motor cars that keep to the right hand side of the road, and a set of sumptuary laws which really constitute one of the most surprising conundrums in the history of public opinion. For public opinion was sufficient to carry these laws and I have not discovered an equal strength of public opinion in maintaining them. I say that underneath this surface difference the thing that strikes the Englishman is that immediately below the surface he finds he is at home—he is at home.

I boarded a train at Montreal and a man stopped me because he came from the village where my father was born and he wanted to send a message to the old folks at home, whom he had not seen for a dozen years. I was dug out of my berth somewhere on the prairie by the indefatigable journalist on the plea, which I believe was a sincere plea, that he remembered being at Oxford with me. I got as far as Vancouver and in crossing on the ferry who should be the mate of the ferry but the man who was captain of the boats, who tried 20 years ago to teach me to row. An Englishman cannot feel very far away from home if these are the incidents of a pleasant month of travel in this great Dominion.

And therefore, to return to my subject, a democracy—let us first of all be clear how we define it; secondly, remember that you are not to judge of democracy by some set of theories suitable, I dare say, to French philosophers, but to judge it in the old practical British way, which is as much Canadian as English, by throwing all your work and all your heart into the practical business of making government work by removing

difficulties when they come, and not anticipating the dangers which may arise.

Let me give you a particular example. I do not believe that British temper has ever attached so much importance to abstract equality as some other races and nations on the earth. I remember being told a story of a famous French socialist, Louis Blanc. Louis Blanc, after taking a vigorous part in the extreme socialist movement of France, spent his declining years in London, and besides being an extremely fiery socialist he was also an admirable English scholar. He was sitting one May day in a London park at an hour when the carriages were going up and down Rotten Row, and you saw the ladies in their silks and satins being driven by a prosperous coachman behind immaculately fed and groomed horses. And Louis Blanc said there was a beggar, a miserable broken-down creature, sitting on the next chair to himself, eating chipped potatoes out of a bit of newspaper. And Louis Blanc's passion for equality, the Frenchman's passion for "égalité", so overwhelmed him that he turned to this poor beggar and said to him, "This is a sad sight. Here are these over-fed people driving about with their carriages and horses—horses stuffed with oats, while you a poor miserable beggar eat chipped potatoes out of a screw of newspaper." And the beggar looked at him and said, "Frenchman?" which very much annoyed Louis Blanc, because he thought he spoke English very well. "Yes," he said, "I am a Frenchman." The beggar . . . "Ya 'aven't got 'orses like that in Paris, 'ave ye?"

That is the honest pride which makes the perquisites of a community treated collectively something which the poorest and humblest member of that community feels he has a share in. And I don't believe that in the democracies which have developed under the British flag we are so much engaged in pursuing these theoretic questions as we are, as I have already said, in striving to make the world in which we live, and the government which it is in our power to control, the best practical instrument for liberty and progress that we can.

There is nothing, believe me, which more closely binds together the Englishman in the old home and these great vigorous sister nations under the British flag beyond the sea, than this same practical spirit which desires to do its utmost and its best to build the next storey of the house instead of spending all our time on architectural plans which perhaps may never be wanted.

I said just now I would leave out the equality of women for a moment, but having been for a good many years in

England a firm believer in including women in the political rights of citizenship, you will allow me to say one thing about it. We have had a bit of controversy in England on this subject in connection with democracy, but the thing is over now. I do not know that the world has been made so much better because the women have been given votes. But I am equally certain it has not been made so much worse as the opponents of women's suffrage declared. Indeed, in my humble judgment, those who opposed women's suffrage were guilty of two of the most absurd and extravagant fallacies which could ever enter the minds of men. The ordinary argument against women's suffrage always was, "There are more women than men and if you once give the vote to women where will you be then." What is the answer? The answer is, my friend, if that prospect alarms you then you must be one of those curious beings who first of all is of the opinion that all women agree with one another, and secondly of the still more extraordinary opinion that no woman ever agreed with a man.

I mention women's suffrage in this connection because it illustrates one of the reasons why the effort to promote democratic principles and democratic forms of government is so often followed by a certain sense of disappointment. It was so easy in the old days for a man to go into the political arena to fight with a zest for the establishment of democracy. It was so easy to idealize democracy, with the destruction of despotism and the overthrow of privilege as the first necessary step in a better world. And again and again people who have started great crusades, inspired by this democratic faith, have really been engaged in overthrowing some other monster in the path of progress, and the instrument by which they did so was an appeal to the democratic sense of the country. But it by no means followed that when they had overthrown the monster, democracy itself might not present other serious and grave objections of its own.

Now what are they? Let me first take an objection that is constantly made, which in my humble judgment is not well founded. It is very often said that the democratic form of government, a government which does its utmost to give equal political power to all qualified citizens, really puts the fortunes of a state, of a nation, of a community in the hands of a body so fickle and shifting and changing, that no stability can safely be counted upon. I believe that is a libel on democracy and I want to give you an instance to prove it. Consider the situation as it existed in 1914. What was it which carried the democracies of the world into that dreadful but necessary war?

It was not love of fighting. It was not commercial rivalry. It was not racial animosity. It was not even high animal spirits. It was because once a democracy is touched by the appeal of an ideal there is a force in the blow that a democracy can strike which can never be parried not even by the mailed fist and shining armor of the best organized despotism in the world. And notice this further. There was a war which many people thought might perhaps be a short war. We know well how long it lasted. Yes, but who was it that stuck it out, who was there at the finish? It was the democracies of the world that remained faithful to that great ideal. The Empire of Germany, the Empire of Austria, the tyranny of Turkey, the Czardom of Russia, these forms of government in the end fell and were overthrown. But it was that form of public effort which is organized on the basis of a democracy—women and men too—which was able to endure the agony and the bloody sweat for the sake of an ideal. I think it is one of the most interesting and instructive facts in the modern world that after all that has been said by the philosophers and wise men as to the fickleness and untrustworthiness of widely spread democracy, that it should have been the democracy of Britain, the democracy of Canada, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, that splendid devoted democracy of France, little Belgium and elsewhere, they were the people who really felt that it was worth while to make the sacrifice which was ahead—the sacrifice which was going "to make the world a place safe for democracy."

And, gentlemen, what I want to appeal to you now about is this. In these democracies most of the common folk have had their share in fighting the wars of history. The common man is the first to become the common soldier. The mother, the wife in the humble home, feels the full force of the burden which is cast upon her house when the bread-winner is called forth to the war. But although the common folk have fought every war in history there has never in all history, until now, been an opportunity for the democracies of the world to make the peace. Emperors have made peace. Popes have made peace. Diplomats have made peace. But it is literally true to say that it is within the power of the democracies of the world, if they choose to be faithful to that which swept them into this war, to be a new force in the history of humanity, and to build for peace with the same devotion with which they fought in war. I know that I am saying what must be familiar and trite in the minds of many of you, but memory even of the most agonizing and terrible things gradually becomes softened

and overgrown as year passes year, and even now are we not beginning to forget some of the horror and terror and sorrow and sacrifice of war? The returned soldier is not, I think, in the habit of telling his folks at home quite all that he has seen and all that he has suffered. We have lived so close to this period that we have hardly had time to realize the miracle that, in a comparatively few years through which this great event lasted, science was mobilized and organized without notice in order to turn war into an infinitely more terrible thing than it was thought to be on the day war was declared. Who was there in August 1914, who knew that before that was over the use of stifling, burning, asphyxiating chemical gases would not only be attempted by one side in the contest, but would be imitated by the other, and would become by the time the war was over one of the recognized weapons of warfare by the war offices of the civilized nations of the earth? Who was there when that war began who could have visualized that before it was over science would be diverted from its beneficent work of healing human injury and devoted to the awful business of human destruction? Who anticipated a deadly submarine menace beneath the waves, and the bombing of it out of existence with deep-sea charges? Who was there when the war began who knew that before it was over by the most wonderfully ingenious applications of physics it would actually be possible to identify the position of a German gun when the gun could not even be seen from the air by aeroplane, by the utilization of a listening apparatus; and more than that, that it would be possible to fire on that gun in the fog and in the mist and ascertain how nearly you reached the objective by listening for the explosion? Yet all this was done. It was improvised in four or five years by the devoted energy of scientific men.

I went to Oxford the other day and saw there a young friend of mine, one of the most distinguished physicists of the present day. He, like every other young man of spirit, left his task and undertook to serve his country the moment war was declared. Before the war was over they discovered that he was one of the greatest of chemists and he was largely responsible for some of the most ingenious applications in science on the Allied side. My young friend is back at his task. I saw him there working at his laboratory only the other day. He has not given up thinking how science may be used for the destruction of mankind. And one of the supreme tests of democracy is going to be now whether that unlimited devotion which it gave to a great and holy cause can be organized and concentrated in an equally determined and devoted effort in the

cause of peace. I do not think for one moment that statesmen, however distinguished, however disinterested, can ever effect a fundamental change in the character of the human race. It is not statesmen that can do that. It is the peoples whom they serve. And my appeal to all who may be dispirited at some of the shortcomings and failures of modern methods of government is this: we know now what a democracy can do when it is aroused to a great effort by an appeal which cannot be denied. Let us see if we cannot arouse it again, make a second appeal, in the service of humanity. I am sure that if we do we shall have done the very thing for which British dust and Canadian dust, mingled on many a slope and in many a valley in France and Flanders, was so willingly surrendered.

And finally, allow me to say, that if anybody goes from this meeting and is kind enough to say that in listening to me he thought I adopted too ideal a tone, I would answer, no community will ever secure real progress unless it continues to be inspired by an ideal. Politics, according to some people and in the hands of some men, is the most disgusting and dirty of trades, but politics, in the true sense, is practical idealism. It is perceiving some vision, not as some saint or hermit may see it, who secludes himself from being soiled by the work of the world and merely sits in his lonely cell and prays for its realization, but it is seeing an ideal as democratic citizens ought to see it, as something which, through the effort of all good citizens, may be attained and become a reality. You remember, perhaps, the lines of Shelley:—

"To love, to bear, to be, 'till it creates
From its own self the thing it contemplates."

And there is a sense in which by offering oneself with others of like mind into some high and noble crusade you bring down from the skies to the level of earth, something at any rate of that to which we aspire.

There is a well-known but very beautiful poem written by an Englishman whose name remains largely conjectural, in which he reflects how much he had tried to do and how little he had succeeded in doing in his life, and he consoled himself;

"Oh, earlier shall the roses blow,
In after years,
And children weep when we lie low,
Far fewer tears, far softer tears."

Democracy is practical idealism. It is the appeal which every good citizen makes to his fellows to devote himself to the religion of seeing that his country is well governed. It is

the hand-maiden and protector of liberty in the broadest sense, and it is because, going back to the old land, I feel that in these sentiments there is something which binds us so close together that for my part I am more concerned to share this community of spirit than to discuss any of the mechanical matters of Empire.