

Party Spirit in Politics

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PARTY SPIRIT IN POLITICS

By PETER BOARD.

When William III. determined to select his ministers from the dominant party in the House of Commons, he created a distinction for future generations between politics and statecraft and between the politician and the statesman. From that time it has been the object of political parties to command the majority of votes in all those parliaments which follow the constitution of the British Parliament and, by so doing, to secure for their adherents the power and the spoils of office. Party politics, like war, has in its operation called out the best and the worst in human nature. Patriotism and self-abnegation as well as deceit and self-seeking have marked the history of political parties, but it is the latter which has led to the widespread condemnation of party politics.

Burke declared, "Parties must ever exist in a free country." Party government, although it has been in operation under the British Constitution for nearly 250 years and has borne the distinctive marks we recognise to-day for nearly 100 years, has undoubtedly developed features which are detrimental to the well-being of the State. Australian instances can readily be found.

Political parties have adopted an organisation governed by rules so inflexible that it has acquired the rigidity of a machine. Under the party system the electors have been restricted in their choice of representatives by a pre-selection of candidates in which the members of the party as a whole have had no voice. These electors are denied the right of choice by the interposition of small groups who, with the "arrogance of elected persons," determine which candidates shall be the favored recipients of their votes.

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Again, political parties have claimed the right to dictate to governments what their administrative and legislative actions shall be, and ministries have been found so subservient to this dictation that the responsibility of a ministry to parliament has been discarded and its place taken by the responsibility of ministers to persons outside parliament.

Political parties in the course of their development, have established over their own members a tyranny which destroys freedom and independence of thought. Obviously, membership of a party implies a concurrence in the foundation principles of the party and in the attitude towards public welfare that the party adopts, but outside of that claim for allegiance, where differences of opinion may legitimately exist without inconsistency with party membership, liberty of opinion has been denied and the rulers of the party have adopted the theory stated by Hobbes in his *Leviathan* that, "A doctrine repugnant to civil society is that whatever a man does against his conscience is sinne."

Further, party politics gives a bias to the administrative acts of government which interferes with justice in administration. However perfect an Act of Parliament may be, it touches private and personal interests at some point or other and a vigorous political party on the alert to make party allegiance profitable to its members, takes care that the administrator does not so far regard the public welfare that the opportunities for serving these private and personal interests are lost.

Finally, political partyism tends to produce sectional legislation. Representing, as the party does, a section of the people of the State, it feels that the support of that section can only be retained if the legislation the party promotes gives some exclusive privileges to the section which supports it. If a party rests for its existence on a class-conscious cleavage, it produces a class legislation which disregards the welfare of the whole people, so that

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government "of the people, for the people, by the people" does actually "perish from the land."

These evils undoubtedly do follow from political partyism in government. But the question may well be asked: Are these evils a necessary and inevitable consequence of political parties, or rather are they not inherent in the mechanism, the organisation through which effect is given to the party's objects? There must be parties as long as there are amongst the people of the State opposing attitudes on political problems. Parties are distinguished from one another less by their formulated creeds than by their "attitudes towards life, the problems of life, and social forces and humanity." Where a group of persons finds itself adopting a common attitude on these questions a party comes into existence. It is this community of thought and sentiment that is the essential element of party. But there is nothing in this community of sentiment and attitude that makes necessary or inevitable those evils which are deplored as the results of political parties. It is when the effort is made to give practical effect to the sentiments which hold the party together that machinery is devised which produces these evils. It then becomes possible that a party which is bound together by a common attitude towards life's problems which is in every respect admirable, may even counteract its own principles and violate the fundamental requirements of well-ordered social welfare, by the adoption of a party mechanism which is relentless in its operation. Is a party so far inseparable from its mechanism that it cannot give effect to the principles which determine its creed without inevitably doing violence to the purity of political life? It is only an extreme pessimist's view of human nature that would admit this to be the case.

One or two of the ill effects of partyism might be examined. The complaint that the working of the party machine in the pre-selection of candidates prevents the free choice of the electors might be obviated by means of a primary ballot. If all the candidates who offer themselves

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for election were allowed to go to the poll, a preferential system of voting would go far to ensure that the choice of the electors was expressed, but as many party supporters doubt the efficacy of this system, the holding of a preliminary ballot in which all members of the party organisation had the opportunity to vote would leave no doubt as to the candidate of their choice.

Another objection that the party demands an allegiance of such an exacting character that individual freedom of opinion is stifled is one that again arises from the organisation and mechanism of party and is not a necessary consequence of the existence of party. Parties in order to show their attitude on public questions and to supply a basis for the allegiance of their adherents adopt platforms and policies which attempt to cover the whole field of possible legislation. The party must have a creed which constitutes the spiritual element in its life. A statement of this fundamental creed is necessary. The great English political parties have no written platform, but the Liberal and Conservative parties are the growth of hundreds of years with traditions handed down from a Whig and Tory ancestry. The spiritual elements of the parties are built into these traditions and need no formal statement. The political parties of a young country have no such traditions and have to formulate their creeds in written platforms. Absolute unwavering adherence to these formal statements is demanded of all members of the party and, as a consequence, a conflict of loyalties arises, the loyalty of members to their organisation conflicting with their loyalty to their own convictions. It is obvious that the more numerous the "planks" of the party policy are, the greater are the chances of divergences of opinion and the greater the conflict of loyalties likely to arise.

Parties in modern politics have departed from Burke's definition of a party as "a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest upon

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some particular principle upon which they are all agreed." Ostrogorski, in his "Democracy and Political Parties," amplifies this definition by stating that "a party is a special combination, its basis is agreement on a particular principle and its end is the realisation of an object or objects of public interest." Both definitions presume that a party has adherence to one great principle as its basis, this being distinguished from the ends which it is sought to achieve. Partyism, however, has departed from these definitions by attempting to base its constitution on a number of principles. By demanding from its members adherence to all of them, it invites the conflicts which sooner or later lead to internal dissensions and compel a certain amount of insincerity of political profession in order to preserve an appearance of unity. If, on the other hand, a party platform states nothing than the one or the few broad fundamental principles which express its spirit, and its policy expresses only the means by which it hopes to give practical effect to these principles, the tax upon the allegiance of members is reduced and the need for political insincerity is lessened.

Australia to-day stands at the parting of the ways. The whole political structure is strained to meet an altogether unaccustomed crisis, and the cohesion of parties is breaking under the strain. As the Bishop of Armidale remarks in an impressive article in the last "Quarterly," "The temper of our political and social life to-day may be described as one of bitter mortification." Has not the occasion arisen for a political party which will have the boldness to affirm a belief in something which will transcend the materialism that has marked our political standards in the past? The confession of a political idealism calls for audacity. But, even now, is there not in the Australian nation a large body of electors who still believe that, behind all our material aims, behind all our search for individual advantage, behind all our strivings for social well-being, there stand great spiritual issues which we must recognise, which we must embody in our political creeds,

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and which must create the atmosphere in which our common-weal can be realised? We are looking to political parties to give a new point of departure. Must Australia look in vain? Must it be disposed of as visionary and impracticable that Australia should possess a political party whose spirit shall not be entangled in its own mechanism, but shall preserve its single-minded integrity even amidst the struggles of parties for political ascendancy?

—PETER BOARD.