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CONTENTS

	Page
Democracy	1
Triumph — or Disaster!	10
Statistics:	
Productivity in U.K. and U.S.A.	15
Productivity in Aus- tralian Manufacturing	17
Australian Production Statistics	18
Free Enterprise and Socialism	21
Publicity	29
Correspondence	31

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DEMOCRACY . . .

DEMOCRACY" is a term that is used, and abused, with an almost nauseating frequency—on political platforms, in leading articles, in everyday conversation. It is one of the most popular words in the lexicon of the orators of the United Nations Assembly. But the frequency of its use is not paralleled by a comparable appreciation of its meaning. The term "democracy" is in fact in danger of becoming a slogan, an irritating parrot-cry, devoid of content and significance. There is little evidence of a clear understanding in the public mind of what democracy really is, of its basic values, and of the conditions necessary to make it work effectively.

A WAY OF LIFE

Democracy is today less a method of government, or system of social organisation, than a way of life. It is true that certain political and social institutions, which are in essence identical, are to be found in most of those countries which can still truly claim to be democratic—universal suffrage, a free parliament, a responsible executive, a system of justice derived largely from British common law. This is the outer crust of



democracy. But indispensable though it is, it does not comprise the real essence, the inner spiritual core.

Democracy is not just a system of government. It is very much more. It is a way of life and, in its deepest and truest sense, a faith. A faith in what? A faith in the ordinary man, in his moral integrity, in his commonsense, judgment and inherent decency, in his ability to govern himself and to work out his own life in his own way. It is the possession of this faith that distinguishes the democrat from the totalitarian. For the totalitarian has no such confidence in the capacity of the common man, no such belief in his moral attributes. Whatever he might profess on the surface, he has at bottom nothing but contempt for the mass of men, and holds that in their own interests they must be directed, and if necessary driven, by those of supposedly superior talent and virtue—to which gifted class he, himself, of course, belongs.

THE TEST OF A DEMOCRAT

When Mr. Churchill, in a memorable sentence, said: "I was brought up in my father's house to trust the people," he was proclaiming the faith of a true democrat. This is the ultimate test of a democrat: Does he or does he not believe in the capacity—not merely the right—of ordinary men to govern themselves and to direct their own lives to the best advantage of themselves and their fellowmen? It is well, that in these days, when democracy is being so strongly assailed, both from without and from within, that every man who regards himself as a democrat should ask himself this question. For it is this faith, and no other faith, with which the democrat must enter the lists to do battle against the fanatical fervour of the Communist conspirators.

A FAITH NOT FIRMLY HELD

That it is a faith not firmly held by many people in the British democracies today should be obvious. It is certainly not possessed by the Communists, who talk glibly of democ-

racy, but who see the only hope for the human species in a soul-destroying and inhumane system of state regimentation. By the political methods they propose, they betray their professed belief in the virtues of the masses to be nothing more than an empty and hypocritical sham.

Nor is the democratic faith firmly held by many socialists, who, ironically enough, believe themselves to be the only true democrats. For they reveal in the doctrines they preach, and even in some of the methods they have introduced, that, at root, they harbour grave doubts about how far the mass of ordinary men can with safety be left to their own devices, to follow their own individual lives according to their own individual bent. Through excessively heavy taxation and through social priorities, they show that they do not believe that the ordinary person can be left largely free to spend his own earnings in the way he may wish; through exaggerated social security proposals they betray doubts whether the average man, if left to go unhindered, will so order his life as to protect himself against the vicissitudes of fortune; in much socialist thinking is implicit the paternal idea that the state must do for the individual, what he cannot altogether be relied upon to do for himself.

And, finally, among the forces of rightist politics, there are some who not merely question the economic soundness or economic justice of many of the new measures designed to improve the lot of the underdog, but who harbour a deep-rooted fear that these things will be abused, and will in the end prove to be to the disadvantage rather than to the advantage of the people they are designed to benefit.

WARNINGS AND ADMONITIONS

There are widespread fears and distrusts abroad today—not merely fears arising from the trend of world affairs or from the threat of communism internally, but fears of the new political currents and movements within the democracies,

fears often unnamed and undefined. The root of these forebodings is a lack of faith in the intellectual and moral resources of the common man. The political atmosphere is thick with warnings and admonitions. There is an astonishing and alarming scarcity of positive constructive contributions, of affirmations of hope and confidence in the future.

In the 1943 and 1946 elections in Australia, and in the 1945 elections in Great Britain, this attitude of mind was evident among a small but vociferous section of non-socialist political thought. Their fear, which was sincerely felt, that the advancing tide of socialism would, unless stopped, rapidly submerge democratic rights and values, they tried to instill into the electorate, who were given horrific visions of "gestapos," concentration camps, and "children in chains." This assault on socialism, which was based primarily, almost wholly, on its alleged threat to democratic freedom and only to a minor extent on its fundamental inefficiency and unworkability, failed dismally. It failed, not because the people wanted socialism, but because they simply did not believe that any political party would be able to steal from them the ordinary personal freedoms that they had come to accept as their natural right as much as the air they breathed.

A STURDY OAK

The British democracy is not, as some people appear to think, a delicate plant, threatened with extinction by every puff of wind that blows. It is, on the contrary, a sturdy oak that has weathered many violent storms, and that has grown to its present stature over centuries of political evolution. Much blood has been spilt in the democratic cause; much suffering has been endured; measureless sacrifices have been made. Is it likely that a race of people, who have fought so heroically and untiringly for the democratic ideal, and, as

recently as in the great world war just concluded, so magnificently, for the democratic way of life—a race of people who, in Mr. Churchill's words “have been taught to value freedom far above their lives”—will easily surrender its great heritage of hard-won liberties?

It is in the character of the people that the ultimate, in fact the only, protection of democracy lies. Democracy cannot, in the final outcome, be safeguarded by written constitutions or by long drawn-out legalistic arguments on the interpretation of those constitutions. Written constitutions or scraps of paper can no more guarantee the survival of democracy than they can guarantee world peace. Constitutions are at best a first line of defence, not a secure, impregnable bulwark.

Just as democracy cannot be created by a legal enactment, so its existence cannot be preserved by a legal enactment. The essence of democracy does not lie in formal structures, but in spiritual comprehension. The democratic Weimar constitution, constructed in Germany after the 1914-18 war, collapsed because the German people could not make it work—because it was a body without a soul, a form without inspiration, because it was not in consonance with the character, temper and spirit of a large part of the German race. Democracy is not a way of life which any nation or society can adopt tomorrow morning. The people who today enjoy democracy do so because they have so far proved themselves to be fitted for democracy. Freedom is in their blood. Their democratic way of life is simply the outward political expression of their inner spiritual selves. Democracy grew out of people. It is not something external or apart from the people who comprise it. If the Australian people should ever lose their democracy—except temporarily to some external dictatorial power—it will mean that they are in any case no longer worthy of

democracy. "A free society cannot exist unless people want to be free. Without this, the whole paraphernalia of democratic organisation becomes a dreary mockery."*

A FALSE ANALOGY

Professor Hayek's renowned and brilliant attack on socialist planning, "The Road to Serfdom," was marred by the false analogy he drew between Britain and Germany. He argued that it was the introduction of socialist methods into Germany that prepared the way for the Nazi despotism, and that a similar train of events in Britain was certain if the British people followed the road of socialist planning. This argument overlooked the profound gulf between the German and British mentality and character, the immense differences in their history and experience. His thesis on the incompatibility between extreme socialism and democracy, on the impossibility of preserving individual freedoms in a planned economy, was altogether admirable. It cannot easily be contested. But he might have derived some confidence from the past story of the British race, as well as from the great struggle they were engaged in at the time he wrote, for the preservation of their liberties; he might have felt some confidence that extreme socialism was not for the British people, and that any political party that pursued it would, as soon as the effects of its policy were clear beyond doubt, be eventually overthrown.

NO ARGUMENT FOR COMPLACENCY

All this is not an argument for complacency about the future. At all times, and especially in these times, the democrat must be forever on the alert; he must sleep with one eye open. This does not mean, however, that he will let his

* Professor Jewkes — Ordeal by Planning.

slumbers be disturbed by every strong gust of the changing political wind or by every idiotic croak of the totalitarian frogs.

There are other reasons why complacency has no part in a true democracy. Democracy is the most difficult of all systems of social organisation to work successfully, because it imposes very exacting terms on the individual man and woman. It is well that we should constantly remind ourselves what those conditions are. They are basically two — responsibility and tolerance.

RESPONSIBILITY

Democracy demands pre-eminently a high degree of responsibility on the part of the individual. Individual responsibility must go hand in hand with individual freedom. Without responsibility there can, in the end, be no freedom. Freedom does not mean, as some people appear to think, freedom to go our own way, to act in the way we may wish, to do what we would like to do, regardless of the effect of our actions on other people. Those people who think of democracy as a political system which leaves them alone to make as much money as they can and to pursue their own private pleasures without stint, betray a lamentable lack of understanding of what living in a democracy really requires of them. The true democrat must have a deep and abiding sense of duty to his fellowmen. He must test his actions not merely by the benefits they may bestow upon himself, but by their effects on the community as a whole. He must moderate his private ambitions where they run counter to the public welfare.

Any business which charges its consumers excessive prices for its products, or imposes unfair conditions on its employees, is acting undemocratically. It is undermining the confidence of the people in the system of private enterprise which it so

strongly, and so rightly, regards, as an essential part of the democratic way of life. A trade union which makes unfair demands for higher wages or better conditions, or instructs its members to curtail production or participate in unjustified strikes, in flagrant disregard of the comfort and convenience of the community, is failing to live up to its democratic responsibilities. The apathy and indifference of many trade unionists which make it possible for Communists to gain control of national unions is the very antithesis of the democratic principle of responsible self-government.

On the other hand the voluntary agreement entered into recently, in face of the threat of inflation, by the trade unions in Britain to postpone claims for high wages and by the members of the Federation of British Industries to refrain from increasing dividends was a triumph for democratic values. It would have been far otherwise if the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Stafford Cripps, had found it necessary to enforce wages and profit ceilings by compulsion. Compulsion is no substitute for the responsible action of free men and women.

TOLERANCE

Tolerance is the second great requirement of a successful democracy. When intolerance becomes widespread and threatens to supersede tolerance, then the very foundations of democracy are threatened. For if we truly respect our fellowmen, then we will respect their views, however much we may differ from them, or however distasteful we may find them. A man ceases to be a democrat when he becomes completely intolerant of the views of others. Criticism is of course an essential part of the democratic way of life, for it is from the welter and clash of conflicting views that policy in a democracy is finally shaped. But the criticism must observe a decent moderation, must be based on a full and fair examination of the opposite case. Criticism which descends to violent abuse, which partakes of the nature of blatant propaganda,

expressly designed to mislead and confuse, has no part in a healthy democracy. One of the greatest curses of Australian political life is the alarming extent of pure propaganda, a force whose range and potentialities have been enormously strengthened by the radio and the modern popular press. To produce its effects propaganda relies on abuse, ridicule, distortion, and sometimes straight-out falsification of the facts. It is outside the range of tolerant responsible criticism and in its extreme form has no place in a proper democracy.*

In a democracy, there must be respect for the rights, and tolerance for the aims, of minority groups. The popular conception of democracy as "majority rule," indispensable though it is to the democratic process — to democracy in action — does not commence to explain the inner nature of democracy. Great crimes can be committed against the democratic ideal in the name of "majority rule." Between the interval of elections, it is possible for a bare majority of 51 per cent. to perpetrate the grossest injustices against the remaining 49 per cent.

THE CHRISTIAN SPIRIT

The spirit of democracy is very largely the Christian spirit — the spirit of brotherly love, good neighbourliness, a deep-rooted respect for the rights, ambitions and ideas of your fellowmen. When these things depart, when tolerance gives way to intolerance, when responsibility is submerged by irresponsibility, when respect is succeeded by contempt, when faith in the human kind is dethroned by scepticism and cynicism, democracy is dead even though the outer political forms may linger on.

Men show their belief in democracy not by what they profess, but by the way they act.

*"Even if freedom of thought and liberty of belief are fully granted, they may be attacked again by the newer method, not of trying to compel people to believe, but by cheating them into believing. This is called propaganda."
—Stephen Leacock in "Our Heritage of Liberty."

