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Author(s): ALBERT JAY NOCK

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WHAT ARE ELECTIONS FOR?

BY ALBERT JAY NOCK

I

SO MANY years have elapsed since I last witnessed a national campaign that I had forgotten a great deal about their routine, and on that account I was rather interested in going over some of the old experiences afresh. Living in a remote rural district all last summer, I was not close to any political centre and saw nothing of any stirring situations, and had to depend on newspapers for knowledge of what was going on. For this reason, probably—though other reasons may have had something to do with it—my mind soon got off the merits of the candidates and their issues. In view of the country's situation, the sum total of the issues, as the papers presented them, was not impressive, and the sum total of the candidates did not look promising. Reports of the conventions brought to mind the mediæval saying, "The devil began to shear a hog, and exclaimed, 'Great cry and little wool!'" I wondered whether the results were worth the fuss, and above all, whether they were

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worth the price; and thus by easy stages I got around to wondering why, exactly, we have elections. What is an election for?

It is no easy question to answer—let the reader try it. The conventional and handsome thing to say is that an election is to register the will of the people; but this will hardly do, because in practice the scope set for the exercise of the people's will is so extremely small. I do not recall any national election at which the will of the people was exercised in any really significant way, or had the chance to be so exercised, either in respect of candidates or of issues. I can not make out that the will of the people had much influence upon the conduct of the two conventions at Chicago, or upon the selection of Mr. Hoover and Mr. Roosevelt as candidates. On the contrary, all this procedure seemed to me singularly well cut and dried. Perhaps it must always be so; perhaps our system gives the closest approximation to the will of the people that can be had. Still, it is not close enough to exclude doubt, or even to exclude suspicion.

Another reason, not so creditable, for having elections, appears in the fact that there is money in politics, that practical politics is a gainful occupation. As the foregoing may be called the conventional or popular reason, so this may be called the politician's reason. In this view, an election is to decide whether one set of people or another should draw salaries, enjoy perquisites and prestige, distribute patronage, and put themselves in the way of getting graft. But one hesitates about accepting the idea that this is all there is to an election, though the sight of what actually goes on might make one think so. One feels that politics, at least in theory, should have some sort of bearing on the general welfare, and that elections exist for other purposes than those to which professional politicians, jobholders, jobseekers, and grafters put them.

Thus finding the conventional view and the politician's view alike unsatisfactory, I thought I would take the matter higher up and see whether statesmen had anything to say

about it. I was curious to find out, if I could, whether it had ever occurred to any statesman to ask himself the plain question, What do we have elections for? and if so, how he answered it. Having decided to go higher up, I thought I might as well go as high as I could to begin with and work downward if necessary, so I went at once to the greatest of all British statesmen.

Edmund Burke earned this title because he was never content to rest on the surface of any public question. Regardless of consequences, he always struck straight through to "the reason of the thing," *das Ding an sich*, saw it clearly, never lost sight of it for a moment, and by his power of exposition enabled other people to see it. Just this, too, we may remark in passing, was what made Mr. Jefferson the greatest of all American statesmen. Burke was a notoriously unsuccessful politician; he had as little influence on the actual direction of development in England—the more is the pity!—as Mr. Jefferson had in America. But in their clear vision of how the course of affairs ought to go, and why it ought to go that way, both men were among the high elect of statesmanship, and we have not seen another like them in either country since.

So it struck me that if my question had occurred to any statesman it would have occurred to Burke; and, sure enough, I found it had. His answer to it, moreover, was so extraordinary, so utterly unlike what we would expect any one to say, that I venture to italicize it. In a letter to the Duke of Richmond, Burke observes that his political associates are all very keen on matters of routine, keen on pushing measures, keen on winning elections, but not at all keen "on that which is the end and object of all elections, namely: *the disposing our people to a better sense of their condition.*"

II

This, then, according to the highest authority, is the statesman's idea of what an election is for. It is by no means the conventional idea, and very far indeed from the politician's

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idea. Burke again, on another occasion, shows clearly by implication what the politician's idea is. It is the main business of the jobholder, he says, "still further to contract the narrowness of men's ideas, to confirm inveterate prejudices, to inflame vulgar passions, and to abet all sorts of popular absurdities." Naturally so, because this is the kind of thing that tends to keep him in his job. *A fortiori*, this must also be the main business of the jobseeker, because it is the kind of thing that moves people to oust the jobholder and give the job to him. Therefore in the politician's view, an election is a trial of expertness in the use of these means, expertness in the handling of formulas, catchwords, chicane; and disposing the people to a better sense of their condition is the very last thing he wants done.

But the last campaign was largely occupied with our economic condition, so we may at least be said to have a better sense of that. One can not be quite sure. For my own part, I think that the campaign muddled our sense of it, and muddled it intentionally. All I can see in the jobholders' activities is an effort to keep a huge structure of debt intact until the election was over; a sleight-of-hand-man's effort to give the impression of creating something out of nothing. In respect of our economic condition, I think we may have occasion later on to recall Burke's saying, in a letter to Windham, that "our politics want directness and simplicity. A spirit of chicane predominates in all that is done; we proceed more like lawyers than statesmen. All our misfortunes have arisen from this intricacy and ambiguity in our politics."

But I do not wish to make a point of this. Let us assume that the election cleared our sense of our economic condition and put us satisfactorily on the way to an increased material well-being. What I wish to dwell on is the statesman's idea of an election as a kind of mile-post by which a people may reckon its progress, not towards material well-being alone, but towards civilization. A widely diffused material

well-being is the soundest basis upon which civilization can rest, but it is not civilization, and there is a source of great danger in the assumption that it is. Business, "prosperity," all the apparatus of a roaring trade, the paraphernalia of physical comfort and convenience, are not civilization, and there is a source of great danger in the assumption that a people which has them is therefore necessarily a civilized people. From the statesman's point of view, it is the business of organized society to discourage this assumption wherever it exists, and to use an election for the purpose of showing what civilization is, and how far a people has progressed towards it.

I do not know what is actually going on in Russia, but I see no reason why we should not accept the official statement that the idea is to create a wider diffusion of material well-being than has ever been known. This is a noble aim, and my friend Professor Robinson, who knows Russia well and is above all things judicial, told me some time ago that he believed the Russian Government is thoroughly sincere about it. But with all this, one must see a source of danger here. It is possible that in an intense preoccupation with this aim, an intense concentration upon the widest possible diffusion of material well-being, the ideal of civilization may become debased and coarsened, and even the knowledge of what constitutes civilization may disappear.

I would not for a moment suggest that the Russian Government does not see this danger, or that it would disregard it; still less that it would justify a disregard of it on the plea of necessity—a necessity which is quite apparent—for great immediate concentration upon the increase and diffusion of material well-being. Yet it is possible that all this may happen, and an American student of civilization must above all others feel anxious about this possibility, because just that is what has happened here. It is possible that in their intense preoccupation with creating the physical apparatus of civilization, the Russians will sacrifice to it, as we have sac-

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rificed, everything that would give them control of the future; they may sacrifice culture, insight, intelligence, dignity, delicacy, self-respect—everything that in the long run gains acceptance with the best reason and spirit of mankind.

A people does not progress towards civilization on the line of material well-being alone, but also on the lines of conduct, of intellect and knowledge, of beauty and poetry, of social intercourse and manners. Organized society must take as clear and full account of all these lines of advance as it does of the line of material well-being; for without this co-operation of society, as Burke says, “man could not by any possibility arrive at the perfection of which his nature is capable.” Society can not safely, in a word, protect a man’s person and his property and facilitate his business, and then leave him to make his way on other lines of aspiration and endeavour as an isolated creature. The statesman perceives with Burke that politics should serve as the expression of organized society’s progress on all these lines, and that an election should dispose us to a sense of our condition, not only with respect to material well-being, but with respect to conduct, to intellect, to beauty, and to manners.

As laid down in abstract terms, this seems far-fetched and visionary, because we are so much more familiar with the conventional view and the politician’s view of public affairs than with the statesman’s view. Let politics promote “prosperity” and protect property, and we expect no more, but are quite content with its leaving the other elements of civilization to the encouragement of private enterprise. In fact, as long as we had prosperity and could enjoy the kind of prestige that wealth commands, it has never concerned us greatly that as a people we should remain stationary on the other lines of progress towards civilization; and the last thing that would enter our mind is that our remaining stationary might give rise to any danger that a statesman need worry about.

A brief examination, however, will show that the statesman’s view is neither far-fetched nor visionary, but on the

contrary, highly practical; much more so than either the conventional view or the politician's view. It is surely significant that peoples have never succeeded in making an impression on the world's memory on the strength of their wealth, their trade, or their political prestige. Their title to remembrance never lies in what business they did or in what money they had, but in what manner of spirit they were of. We all know of nations that were prosperous and powerful, but have disappeared without leaving any mark whatever on the world's progress; and of others that were quite disinherited of both wealth and prestige, which have nevertheless left their impress indelibly on the world's civilization, and are likely to be remembered forever. I have often thought it would be interesting to determine what it is by which the United States would live in history if it were destroyed tomorrow—as, for instance, the Israel of the Judges lives, or the Athens of Pericles, peninsular Rome, Elizabeth's England, or the France of Louis XIV.

But what people will think of us a hundred years hence, or five hundred, probably does not affect us much at the moment. As one of our politicians asked pertinently, "What has posterity done for us" that we should care what it thinks of us, or whether it thinks of us at all? Let us, then, turn to something more interesting that is going on at the present time. As I write these words, England is in a recurrence of her age-long difficulties with the two subject peoples who have shown the most inveterate obduracy against her rule, the Indians and the Irish. I know very few Indians, but those I know tell me that England has given the best government India ever had. They say its intentions are good, and that the administration is generally honest, capable, just, and energetic. They tell me also that trade relations with England are as advantageous as any that India would be likely to get. Yet they are venomously down on the English and ready to give their lives for the sake of sweeping them out of the country; and so too, it seems, are the Irish.

It must have occurred to many of us to wonder what on

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earth the Indians and the Irish want. Why are they dissatisfied with a state of things that seems measurably satisfactory to Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, even to the Scots and Welsh? No doubt many Englishmen ask themselves the same question. The English are like ourselves in supposing that if they offer good trade terms, a good administration, and straighten out material grievances promptly and liberally, they have done everything necessary to make people friendly and loyal. That an alien people may have a moral grievance against them, a grievance not amenable to this kind of treatment, is something that they can not understand; and that a people should let such a grievance outweigh the advantage of good trade terms and good government, seems to them a sheer insane biting off of one's nose to spite one's face. A few weeks ago, an Associated Press dispatch from London said:

In deciding to starve to death unless Great Britain revokes certain features of the electoral plan recently outlined for India, Mahatma Gandhi is "speaking in a language the Indian people understand," Londoners best acquainted with India said today.

Lord Irwin, who preceded the Earl of Willingdon as Viceroy of India, told American newspaper men at a luncheon last summer: "If I were to get out in the hallway of the government buildings at New Delhi, squat on the floor and refuse to eat a bite until the Indian civil disobedience movement came to terms, the trouble would be over in a few days. Of course before those few days could elapse my Liberal, Conservative, and Labor colleagues in London would send for me to come home, and have a padded cell waiting for me on my arrival."

An Englishman can not see why, with all his good-will and good intentions and all the advantages he has to offer, the Irish and the Indians persist in regarding him as an uncivilized being, and dislike having him around.

The answer is that each party has made progress towards civilization on lines where the other has made no progress,

and each party is prepossessed accordingly. The Irish and Indians see that the English make very little of intellect and knowledge as an element in civilization, very little of beauty, very little of social intercourse and manners; while they, on the contrary, have a strong sense of these. The English see that the Irish and Indians make little of material well-being; while they, on the contrary, make much of it. Burke said that if the Irish were ever to be united with the English and not remain obstinately alien, "their temper must be managed and their good affections cultivated." But this is just what the English have not been able to do, for the reason that I have given; and therefore the civilization of England has always remained unattractive, even hateful, to the Irish and the Indians, and the representatives of that civilization have remained objectionable.

Ever since the war, we Americans have been puzzled to know where to look for our friends. Between certain European countries and ourselves, of course, there have been some material grievances arising out of our status as a creditor country; the war debts, for example, and our high tariff. But let us ask ourselves whether, if these had not arisen, or if they were all smoothed out tomorrow, a moral grievance would not yet preclude anything more than a formal and diplomatic friendship with these countries. Would the type of civilization which we offer to the world, and which is all we have to offer, be any more attractive and interesting to them than it apparently is now, and would the human product of that type be more acceptable?

The world's friendship, like its judgment, waits on the question, not how rich and powerful we are, but what manner of spirit we are of; and the statesman is aware of this. A French journalist said the other day that "Americans are the only people who have passed directly from barbarism to decadence without knowing civilization." It may be acknowledged, I think, that our present condition looks much like decadence; and our history may quite justify a foreign

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critic in regarding our previous condition for a century and a half as, in the main, barbarous. The only question is whether our decadence is permanent, or whether it is a temporary state from which we can recover; and there may be two minds about that. But this is not the point; the point is, would cancelling the war debts and lowering the tariff at all tend to allay the moral grievance intimated by this Frenchman, and would it prepossess the actual sentiment of French people, and make them something more than formally friendly towards us and towards our type of civilization? Most of us, I think, believe so; we naturally would regard the French with the same uncomprehending disposition that the English employ towards the Irish and the Indians. But are we right?

Leaving Europe and coming a little nearer home, we all remember Mr. Hoover's "good-will tour" of South America. Those who keep track of such matters have remarked how little has come of it; how little, indeed, has come of all our organized efforts to prepossess our southern neighbours. Only the other day I read a statement that after all our fuss and publicity about a closer sentimental relation, nothing had come of it, and the feeling towards us was in no wise bettered. Well, one can see how this might be so. The Latin countries are no doubt glad to have good trade terms with us, but something more than that is necessary to unite them with us in a bond of sentimental attachment. No doubt they were glad to welcome Mr. Hoover in his capacity of *commis voyageur*, but this did not at all obscure their view of the society he represented; a society characterized, in their opinion, by a low type of intellect and knowledge, a grotesquely formalized type of conduct, a defective sense of beauty, a defective sense of manners.

Now, we may say, Who cares? Why should we concern ourselves any more about the sentiment of other peoples than about the sentiment of posterity? So long as we are rich and powerful and have great political prestige, who cares how they feel towards us? The trouble is that the mere

getting on in the world's family depends on sentiment; the statesman knows this, knows that the friendship which is bot-tomed on wealth, power, and prestige alone is extremely brittle. We have been hearing a great deal lately about the world being one, and that no nation can any longer live un-to itself, and all that sort of thing. If this be so, then es-pecially does the statesman see that mere prudence requires our society to develop more available points of sympathetic contact than the one which industry and commerce supply. He sees with George Sand that in the make-up of civiliza-tion there are "forces of weakness, docility, attractiveness, suavity, which are just as real forces as those of vigour, en-croachment, violence, brutality"; and that statesmanship must develop them and keep them on its side.

Thus it turns out that the statesman's idea of an election is much more sincerely practical than either the conventional idea or the politician's idea. It is for the most practical of reasons that an election should dispose us to a better sense of our condition, not only with regard to our progress on the line of material well-being, but also with regard to our prog-ress on the lines of conduct, intellect, beauty, and manners.

III

Late last summer I met an old friend who has all his life been prominent in national politics, though except for one term in the Cabinet, I think he has never held any office. When I saw him, he was sad and discouraged over the un-speakable degradation of our public affairs. He told me he had heard of a good many lifelong Republicans, men prom-inent in business, who were so disgusted with the Hoover ad-ministration that they were going to vote for Roosevelt. I said that this seemed very little to do, for as long as the cam-paign was conducted on such a low plane, it mattered little which side won. At best, as John Adams said, "the strug-gle will end only in a change of impostors." Why not do something that might have a chance of counting?

Statesmanship is often—I think almost always—more ef-

fectively exercised when it is kept entirely clear of politics and political methods. When Socrates was criticized for standing aloof from Athenian politics, he replied that by so doing he and his followers showed themselves the best statesmen of their time; and he was right. The politics of Athens was a politics of pure formula, catchwords, and chicane; Cleon and Nicias could wink at Mr. Hoover and Mr. Roosevelt across the centuries, and be perfectly well understood. Socrates saw that the thing really needed was to dispose the people to a better sense of their condition, and that the politicians did not do it. He therefore kept resolutely away from all the inevitable commitments, compromises, concessions, that contact with routine politics involves, and took up the task in his own way; and he did so well with it that finally the politicians had to get rid of him.

It struck me that each of the men my friend was speaking of might carry a possible Socrates within himself. Perhaps, instead of contenting themselves with mere grumbling, or voting for an opposition candidate, they might see their way to unite, and get others to unite with them, irrespective of party, in getting out a thoroughgoing, uncompromising, revolutionary, and non-political manifesto, which should be a modern counterpart of Socrates's great discourses on what civilization means, what makes a nation really great, what character a republic ought to bear, and what the individual citizen of a republic should be like, what manner of spirit he should be of. Surely the needed thing is not a change of impostors, not votes for this-or-that candidate or formula or catchword, but a better knowledge of ourselves and our society, a realization of what we are actually like, and how our actual society compares with the ideal that has been set up by the best reason and spirit of mankind.

The right kind of manifesto, devised by the right kind of men, now that the election is well over, would be an act of the best statesmanship in the world. By the right kind of men, I mean men of affairs, like those whom Mr. Gerard

designated as the "real rulers of America," for they are the only ones whose opinions our public has been trained to respect. All the moralists in the country, all the publicists, scholars, educators, men of letters and culture, could have united in getting out a manifesto on prohibition, word for word with Mr. Rockefeller's, and it would have produced no such effect as his, because Mr. Rockefeller has a great deal of money and is *par excellence* the object of popular regard as "a successful business man." To be effective, therefore, this manifesto must be the work of those whom my friend described as being purely men of affairs, entirely out of politics and public life—men of the general type of Mr. Rockefeller.

It may be said that there are not in the country fifty such men who have the character and courage to put forth anything less inept and disingenuous than, say, the Wickersham Report. This may be so. Again it may be said that there are not five hundred among our people with intelligence enough to understand what such a manifesto would be driving at, or sensitiveness enough to take it as more than a seven days' wonder. This also may be so; but both these suggestions are beside the mark, for until they are put to proof they are merely matters of opinion. The point is that statesmanship, if it exists, has a way open whereby it may clear its conscience and its sense of public duty. Even though it can not put elections to their proper use, statesmanship can still do something to the same purpose, outside the scope of practical politics. Whether or not statesmanship is to be found among the men eligible for this service, is another matter; it remains to be known. But if it exists, it can put itself to work in a very significant way—and who knows but in a very effective way?—towards meeting the greatest need of the moment, which is *the disposing our people to a better sense of their condition.*