

Cambridge University Press
Fetter Lane, London

New York
Bombay, Calcutta, Madras
Toronto

Macmillan

Tokyo
Maruzen Company, Ltd

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A SHORT HISTORY OF DEMOCRACY

by

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CAMBRIDGE

AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS

MCMXXX

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

PREFACE

THE nineteenth century witnessed a notable development of democratic principles. One hundred years ago, government almost everywhere was in the hands of wealthy or influential men. The French Revolution proclaimed the doctrine that only in a democratic state could liberty exist, but the implications of popular sovereignty were not fully worked out till a much later date. In the first decade of the twentieth century, a considerable area of western Europe remained under autocratic rule. The desire for self-government was, however, everywhere becoming more powerful. Democracy was evidently in accordance with the trend of affairs. It remained for the Great War decisively to vindicate the principles of democratic government, and its conclusion has been followed by the wide extension of popular constitutions. The forms of self-government are now almost universal. In the new constitutions of the post-War epoch, equal universal suffrage is the rule. At the same time, the principles of democracy have been applied to international relations. Nevertheless, it would be rash to assume that all nations are capable of maintaining and developing free institutions. Under unfavourable conditions, parliamentary government has already proved a failure and been abandoned in some countries of western Europe. But the failure of democratic forms of government may be no more than an indication that these forms have not been vitalised by the spontaneous energy and intelligent co-operation of the people. Democracy is not purely a

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matter of political machinery. A nation cannot be truly self-governing without the knowledge of affairs and the opportunity to exercise a well-informed public opinion. There must be a clear understanding of the problems of government and a vigorous spirit of mutual responsibility. Without these qualities of mind and spirit, the establishment of the democratic system may involve disaster.

The writer has been sufficiently optimistic to think that a brief survey of the history of democratic government might be of service in exhibiting the tendencies of various governmental forms. Knowledge of the changes and developments which have taken place in the past may, not unreasonably, be expected to assist the citizen of the twentieth century to give rational direction to his political ideas and aspirations. Of late years, the question which has come to the forefront is the manner in which the mass of enfranchised citizens will use their new power. This can only depend upon the average standard of knowledge and capacity. In small political communities it is relatively easy to promote self-determination, and consequently to make popular government a living reality. The tendency of the present age, however, is towards larger political units. Can popular sovereignty be effective in the complex communities of the modern era? One method of maintaining spiritual vitality in great states is to establish direct popular control of legislation and administration. This involves modification of the representative system, and a partial return to the democratic practice of antiquity. The wisdom of such modification is a political problem of the greatest magnitude. Is representative government the only form of democracy which is practicable under modern conditions,

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and are the devices of the initiative and the referendum compatible with the retention of the parliamentary system?

To attempt a comprehensive and unprejudiced examination of the forms of democracy in the past, and of the principles upon which they have rested, would be to undertake the task of a lifetime. The writer's object has been more modest. He has sought to trace, in brief outline only, the path of political development, and to lay bare the process by which the democratic institutions of the present day have come to be established. He has found it necessary to furnish a short description and analysis of the main types of democratic government, in order that their comparative merits might be examined. The analysis has been somewhat more detailed in the case of those forms of direct democracy which existed in the city states of antiquity, for the fundamental problems of modern politics were evidently problems for the Athenians and Romans also. It is not suggested that the lessons of history can be readily applied to the solution of these problems, but only that a working acquaintance with constitutional development may help to make fundamental issues clearer, and perhaps to indicate the advantage of certain methods of dealing with political questions. At the same time, care has been taken to judge institutions not by their abstract merits, but in relation to the political and social circumstances under which they were utilised.

It has been no part of the writer's purpose to expound doctrines of political philosophy. On the other hand, the changing outlook of man on the problems of government has found expression in institutional growth, and it has accordingly been necessary to insert, here and

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there in the narrative of political development, a brief discussion of democratic theory.

It will be manifest to readers of this book that the writer has made full use of secondary authorities. He desires to acknowledge a special debt to the volumes of the late Lord Bryce.

January 1930

A. F. H.

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