

OUR ANCIENT WAYS IN POLITICS

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“**K**NOCKS come and go—God’s vassals drop and die.” Conservative succeeds to Liberal and Liberal to Conservative, and the Progressive holds the balance of power. South of the international line, the Republican President gives way to the Democrat; the old party lines become merged; and there comes into being a Congress which is without form and void, composed of an uncounted number of interests, “blocs”, and groups. In England, the Liberal falls, and his place is taken by the Labourite who endures but for a little season, to sink at the feet of the victorious Unionist. Further afield, we behold the phenomena of the French government quietly and smoothly changing its personnel almost with every coming of the full moon; the Italian Fascist assuming the control of the state with scarce the formality of an election; and the Greek nation accepting this, that, or the other head under the threat of force of arms.

The philosophic historian, and even the expert in political science, as he views the whole panorama, particularly as it manifests itself in the states which boast of Anglo-Saxon culture, is not infrequently beset by a spirit of doubt and even depression. And, curiously, this philosopher is troubled in heart at just the time when the man in the street is most stimulated and confident in spirit. That is to say, at “election-time.” For the meditative soul, as it reflects upon the noise and clamour, the dust and heat, the abuse and invective, the lightly made promise, and the utter absence of anything which might suggest *sophrosyne*, or what Matthew Arnold denominates “sweetness and light”—this meditative soul, I say, is wont to retire within itself, and to ask the unanswerable question, To what purpose is this waste?

The question long ago made itself known to the minds of Greek thinkers. Does the elective method, they asked likewise one of another, fulfil the true aims of democracy? And Aristotle, who wrote a book on the Constitution of Athens—which was discovered and made known to the world hardly a generation ago—has more fault to find with the politics of the Athenians than

St. Paul found with their religion four centuries later. Perfection is a rare thing; but the philosopher does actually find it in one or two of the very numerous systems of government which he examines in his *Politics*. Yet the problem of directing the course of the ancient city-state must have been hardly as difficult of solution as that which is concerned with even the modern city. As for the great and elaborately organized fabric of the Roman Republic—who, other than lighthearted Conservatives like Cicero and Livy, could have found it flawless?

But the purpose of this essay is not to bring a railing accusation against rulers and legislators, be they ancient or modern; or to attempt to demonstrate the relative superiority or inferiority of the ancient régime; or even to try to shew the futility of all democratic systems. The writer aims merely at presenting a very few outlines of more or less interesting points of comparison between the ancient and the modern "machines."

This term "ancient", however, is enormously broad, and Greek city-states were legion. Crete, which is a half larger than Prince Edward Island, possessed more than forty. Our museums contain coins of more than fifty independent mints in the island of Sicily, while the islet of Ceos is represented by three. In fact, the number of distinct and independent mints—which mark the city-state—existing in the ancient Greek world is estimated by the numismatist Gardner at between 1500 and 2000. Our survey must, therefore, be restricted to one only of this multitude—the city of Athens. Passing thence, we shall touch the borders of the Republic of Rome.

Like the rest of the ultimately democratic Greek states, Athens was apparently long in ridding herself of the semi-monarchical forms of government which her citizens had brought with them from the European hinterland into the Mediterranean basin. But perhaps, as many scholars have contended and do contend, the word *Basileus*, which we translate King, meant little more than a "war-leader." Still longer survived the patriarchal and aristocratic types—from which the Athenians presently freed themselves. Then, when the political atmosphere seemed to have in a great measure cleared, the plague of *Tyranni*, or unconstitutional despots, appeared on the horizon, and influenced largely the course of sixth-century history. There can be little doubt that under the rule of the Tyrants, the Greek states, including Athens, flourished as never before; but the system was fraught with possibilities all too dangerous. How, asks a speaker in Herodotus, can a despotism be a well-constituted government, where one man is

allowed to do whatever he pleases, without having to answer for his actions?

Even the best of men would alter the train of his thoughts. Insolence will be engendered in him by the advantages of his position. Insolence will cause him to break into many acts of wantonness, and envy into many more. He very readily listens to calumny, and is the most inconsistent of all men. If you shew him respect in moderation, he is offended because he is insufficiently honoured; and if anyone pays him particular honours, he regards the flattery as offensive.

Such a characterization would fit well the case of the late Czar or the ex-Kaiser!

But the expulsion of the despots from Athens was immediately followed by the leaping into life of the strong Athenian democracy, like Athena, her patron goddess, springing fully-armed from the head of father Zeus. During the brief régime of Cleisthenes, the logical successor of the law-giver Solon, the entire system of political machinery was overhauled, readjusted, and set in order with so fine a degree of delicacy and precision that it was destined to run for more than a century without falling into disorder. However, the first two decades of the fifth century were a period of great anxiety for Greece, disturbed as it was with wars and rumours of wars. Fortunately, it had a happy end in the overthrowing of the Persian peril, and in the establishment, not only at Athens but in the Greek world at large, of a new confidence and sense of security such as had long been lacking among the Hellenes. And during the fifty years which followed the battle of Salamis the human intellect lengthened its cords and strengthened its stakes—all within the narrow confines of Attica—as it never had before, and as it never has since.

Before attempting to portray the nature of the Athenian Constitution, we may step aside to observe a primitive electoral method which was employed by the Greeks in early times, and which might well have escaped the notice of the historian had it not survived in a curious form among the institutions of the Spartans, as late even as the fourth century. In the early assemblies, assent to a measure was expressed by the clashing of the spear against the shield, or by any other method calculated to raise a "horrid din." A modification of this practice likewise appears in the shout of acclaim, which was sometimes raised to signify the same intention. The primitive Romans seem to have followed the same course, and the ordinary Latin word for a vote, *suffragium*,

is particularly suggestive, signifying as it does "a responsive crash." Out of all this has emerged, no doubt, our own system of voting by Ayes and Nays.

Now, among the Spartans, the chief council of the state was the *Gerousia* or Senate, composed of the two joint-kings and twenty-eight other members, *Gerontes*, who, like the Canadian Senators, were appointed for life. Whenever a seat fell vacant, it had to be immediately filled by the election of a member who must possess the necessary qualifications of an age of sixty or more, and an aristocratic ancestry. It might be in the interests of Canada to demand as much of *her* Senators.

On election day, each qualified candidate was led in turn through the *Apella* or Assembly. As he passed, the people, as Tennyson says of the Trojans, "roared applause." In a back room were locked the judges, who made note of the relative loudness of the shouts that reached their ears. The candidate welcomed by the greatest applause was declared duly elected. In modern times, contests of a like nature are not infrequently held to determine the most popular member of a musical-comedy troupe, and the writer has seen a similar method employed in an attempt to determine the winner of an "old fiddlers' contest." But there is surely something pathetic, to say the least—as well as ludicrous—in this exposure of the venerable Lacedaemonians to the caprice of the mob; and it is little wonder that Aristotle stigmatizes the procedure as childish. Here, as with too many nations of the present day, clamour was regarded as the equivalent of popularity, and must therefore denote capability for holding office!

But, in the city-state of Athens, all such primitive devices fell into disuse at some very early date, and in historical times we find that men voted by a show of hands—an institution which we have inherited;—by the casting of the lot, which is no longer popular; or by means of a combination of these two methods. *Cheirotonia*, or the showing of hands, was conveniently employed in deciding measures in the popular assembly, and it was also used in that body for the election of certain officials with highly specialized duties, whose appointment could not well be left to the chance of the lot.

It must be borne in mind that, in the fifth century, Athens was not in possession of what may be named a permanent civil service. There were, it is true, professional policemen, clerks, and town-criers; but the Athenians were firm believers in the principle of amateurism, their theory being, as Pericles tells us in the *Funeral Oration*, that quick wits and freshness of outlook

are superior to the experience of routine. Nor were any officials appointed to office on the nomination of other officials.

In, let us say, the fifth century before Christ, the administration of public affairs at Athens was carried out by the public assembly or *Ecclesia*, the council or *Boule*, the board of select magistrates or *Archons*, and the department of militia and defense or *Strategia*. The first-named comprised the whole body of free male citizens—the possibility of such a thing as universal suffrage being only academically suggested by the comedians;—the last was elected from year to year in the *Ecclesia*, by the popular method of show of hands. To a certain extent, undoubtedly, election was dependent on personal popularity, but I think we may credit the assembly with sufficient good sense to have looked more deeply into the matter. As the selection of a good or a bad commander-in-chief is frequently associated with the matter of the life or death of a nation, the point was one which the Athenians were not slow to grasp.

In 508, Cleisthenes had brought about a redistribution of the Athenian people, abolishing their four old tribes, and supplanting them by ten new, nominally tribal divisions. In the appointing of Archons during the period of 487 to about the middle of the century, a sort of primary election of the type so greatly favoured by our American neighbours seems to have been held in each ward or riding, in such a way that a complement of fifty candidates was offered by each of the ten tribes. Resort was then had to the lot, and out of the total of 500 candidates the nine Archons were chosen. Presumably in every case the electoral divisions selected their representatives by open vote; but after the middle of the century the lot was used to decide both elections, so that the selection of any particular Archon became a thing wholly fortuitous.

Yet the apex of the Athenian Constitution was, after all, the *Boule* or council of 500, whose members must needs be over thirty years of age and free citizens of Attica. The office was not a burden, and competition was keen, as the post of council-member was one of distinction and dignity, and the service to the state was well rewarded. This yearly election of candidates was the most exciting political event in the whole twelve months, as the complexion of the council determined the nature of the state policy. The method of selection employed was similar in general to that seen in the case of the Archon-election. That is, each riding chose a certain number of aspirants on a proportional basis, and then 50 were chosen by lot out of each tribe to make up the total of 500.

Few political factors, ancient or modern, are more interesting than the relation of the lot to the government at Athens. The writer of the *Book of Proverbs* declares: "The lot is cast into the lap, but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord." In Homer, too, this idea is clearly manifested, namely, that a recourse to the laws of chance constitutes a direct appeal to heaven for guidance. But in historical times this practice, among the Greeks, becomes largely divested of its religious character, and comes to be applied as a political measure pure and simple. From the treatment of the lot by Plato and Aristotle, we should gather that it was a consciously adopted democratic measure, and that it was the final assertion of the numerical equality of all citizens and of the principle of equal representation. In view of this, the actual history of the use of the lot at Athens is singularly suggestive, and is markedly corroborative of the philosophers' interpretation. The institution was not employed in early Attic history, but it was introduced by the democrat Solon. Under the tyrants it disappears, to return in the time of Cleisthenes. The lot remains in use during the fifth and the greater part of the fourth centuries. But in the Hellenistic period it is discarded every time the Athenian state becomes an oligarchy or autocracy; and it re-appears just as often as the popular party gains the ascendancy. There can be no doubt, then, that the Athenians in general regarded the lot as the weapon of the plain average citizen, as we are wont to consider the secret system of balloting. In this connection it is remarked by the historian Greenidge, a ripe cynic: "It was a standing protest against that party government which the Greek thinker knew to be the deadliest enemy of liberty, and at which, as realized in the pseudo-democracies of America and England, the true Greek democrat would have stood aghast."

We who belong to those pseudo-democracies are still proud of our elections, in thorough disregard of their obvious expense and futility. In view, then, of the horrors which are therein involved—the lavish expenditure of money and time, the scandal and lies, the appeals to the baser passions, and the circumambient atmosphere of suspicion, unrest, and jealousy—is not one fully justified in suggesting, nay, demanding, that this old-fashioned principle, which has received the sanction alike of Holy Scripture and of the Greek sages, be restored in its entirety to our own institutions?

Before abandoning the subject of Athenian politics, I should like to draw attention to still another pleasant feature of the Attic democracy, in accordance with which there occurred from

time to time the "abjection" or "rejection" of certain of the citizen body. I refer to the famous precautionary measure introduced by Cleisthenes and known by the name of *Ostracism*. Its ostensible purpose was that of guarding against a recurrence of despotism in the state, but not infrequently it served the simple end of ridding the city of a man who for some reason or other had become a *persona non grata*. The sentence involved obliged him to go into exile for a period of ten years, but this, notwithstanding, did not carry with it either confiscation of property or cancellation of civil rights. The institution had the further merit of showing a threatening upstart that he had a strong majority opposed to him, and it thus served as a means of frustrating his designs without a resort to violence or bloodshed. One may well conceive of such an institution as being of priceless value if employed in the many democratic states that lie between the Rio Grande and Cape Horn, but its merits ought not to be decried as applying to more enlightened nations.

The Attic method of procedure is interesting. When Dame Rumour began to run hither and thither about the state, the Ecclesia met and decided whether or no the occasion called for heroic measures. If the decision was in the affirmative, a second meeting was arranged, and each citizen wrote on a potsherd or clay tablet the name of some man whom he, personally, wished to have removed. No names were mentioned openly, but it is certain that individual animosities must have led to a wide and futile scattering of votes. However, to render the process effective, a total of at least 6,000 votes had to be registered—although not, in all probability, against a single individual. During the earlier years of the Athenian democracy, the principle of ostracism no doubt served an excellent purpose, but ultimately abuses of one kind or another beset the institution and led to its downfall. Unintelligent voting must have been almost as prevalent then as now. We all remember the story of the illiterate countryman of Attica who had his vote recorded against Aristeides on the sole ground that he was weary of hearing him called the Fair-dealer!

In these latter days of political experimentation, the principle of ostracism, which has never been thoroughly put to the test, and has indeed never been employed in more than four or five states other than Athens, might, with profit, be tested in Canada, a country where extreme political feeling manifests itself so often and so bitterly. At a date like this, so recent from (to use a Latinism) a general election, it would be both unwise and unsafe to mention names; but every Canadian knows perfectly well whom

he (or she) wishes to have driven into exile. Of course, in the event of such "ostracism" being held, John Brown's name would be found on the ballots, because he had thrown tin cans into someone else's yard; Jones's would be mentioned, as his dog had kept his neighbours awake at night; and Landlord Smith would come in for a certain degree of attention for having raised the house rent of his tenants. But there would, for all, undoubtedly result a definite majority directed against a man better known; and he would have to betake himself to the United States or some other foreign country for a period of ten years. By that time, he would have been utterly forgotten, while his own thoughts and desires would have been turned into different channels. So, at the end of the decade, he might readily be permitted to return in peace, with a broken and a contrite heart, to his native land.

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I venture the assertion—to whose superficiality one must shut one's eyes—that to pass from Greece to Rome is to pass from the Anglo-Saxon form of democracy to the Gallic. In the latter there is less freedom, less spontaneity, but a much greater degree of the logical, the cut-and-dried, and the automatic. The great council or Senate of the so-called Roman Republic was constituted on the basis of the accident of birth, while its chief assembly was a timocracy pure and simple. To attain to the highest magistracies of the state one must follow a *cursus honorum*, or ascending scale of offices, as mechanically as the taking of the various masonic degrees. But while certain careers were considered as a necessary preliminary to the holding of office, others were regarded as a necessary disqualification therefrom. No one other than a Roman "gentleman", in the technical sense of the term, was permitted to hold the highest offices, although it is true that one who was engaged in a trade or profession from which he derived an income might become eligible for office by abandoning this way of living.

When the annual election-time was approaching, it behoved the candidate, some three weeks in advance, to make a *professio* or declaration, to the presiding magistrate, of his intention of running for office. An official list of qualified candidates was straightway published; there followed an intensive three weeks' campaign of canvassing. But politicians of even that early day were not above stealing a march on their opponents, and thus we find the wily Cicero in the year B. C. 65 beginning the process of "barnstorming" a full year in advance of the date set for the

consular elections upon which he had set his hopes. To insure a reasonable degree of success, practically the whole of Italy had to be visited. Fortunately in these campaigns the country was spared the misery of being confronted with the misrepresentations and mutual recriminations of the press of our own day; the candidate himself had to rely more largely on his personal efforts than is true of modern conditions. So far as we know, "straw-voting" was never resorted to; but on the other hand, we have positive information that often vast political canvassing "machines" were set in motion long before the arrival of election-day.

During this period of three weeks, legal canvassing rose almost to the dignity of a formal act. The aspirant, arrayed for the occasion in a dazzling white robe, must have presented an appearance more or less pleasing in inverse proportion to the degree of rotundity of his person. Daily he made his round of the public places, affably saluting the citizen-body and extending the "palm of fellowship". Each candidate was surrounded by his cortège of "managers", and kept at his elbow a specially trained *nomenclator* or prompter, a slave who possessed an unusual memory for names and faces. By the aid, therefore, of his whispers, the politician was prevented from making any serious mistakes in addressing the various Gaiuses and Marcuses and Tituses whom he encountered.

As touching the details of campaigning in the Roman state, much of our knowledge has been gained through the discoveries that have been made, in the course of several generations, on the site of the ancient Pompeii, which was overwhelmed by the ashes of Vesuvius in A. D. 79. Of the large number of inscriptions that have here been recovered, several hundreds—strange to say—possess an intimate connection with political propaganda. Pompeii, be it noted, had the status of a *municipium*, and thus enjoyed a fair share of self-government. The chief direction of affairs was in the hands of two joint-mayors and a board of aldermen. Painted in black and red on the walls of buildings, in a manner which recalls the tasteful decorations with which a certain organization known in the United States as the K κ Klux Klan adorns the highways of that country, these inscriptions may be seen to-day in the streets of Pompeii. They prove, on enquiry, to be in most cases appeals on behalf of this or that candidate in the coming elections, and in not a few cases the virtues of these gentlemen are loudly proclaimed.

The earlier inscriptions are of the simpler form. "Make Publicus Furius mayor, I beg of you; he's a good man", is typical of the regular formula. Often we find an insistence on the qualifi-

cations of the candidate for office expressed in the words *dignus re publica*, "qualified for public life." More than one aspirant is affirmed to be "an upright young man" or "a youth of singular modesty." We should all be ready to cast our vote for one particular gentleman, of whom it is predicted—and one hopes with justification—"he will be the watch-dog of the treasury"!

Sometimes we encounter a refreshing naïveté, as in the promise, "Proculus, make Sabinus alderman, and we'll do as much for you." This leads us to the particular type of notice where certain classes of citizens and sometimes civic guilds are called upon to support such and such a candidate. "Inn-keepers, make Sallustius Capito alderman", occurs in one street. A more elaborate example is, "Do make Verus alderman, O perfumers; elect him, I beg you"!

Still another class of proclamation represents the guild or trades-union as showing a united front in support of a certain man. The following examples are typical: "The barbers recommend Trebius for the office of alderman"; "All the fruit-sellers . . . urge the election of M. Holconius Priscus as mayor." And there are instances on record where similar support was granted by garlic-sellers, tailors, pack-carriers, mule-drivers, cab-drivers, and fishermen. Unfortunately the sword sometimes cut both ways, for so public a method of candidacy tended to put a formidable weapon into the hands of political opponents. On a certain wall of Pompeii are still to be read the following cutting words: "The sneak-thieves request the election of Vatia as alderman." According to other notices nearby, "the whole company of the town's drunkards" and "all people who are sound asleep" favoured the candidacy of the same unhappy Vatia.

A citizen who had, presumably, no other qualifications for office than his neighbourliness, sometimes met with the reward of virtue, as in the example: "His neighbours request the election of Verus as mayor." Another runs: "The people of the Campanus ward ask for the election of Sabinus as alderman." Again, one of the pillars of a church, as one may venture to express it, might receive the support of the entire congregation: witness, "The worshippers of Isis, as a body, request the election of So-and-so."

Another class of Pompeian inscription represents the effort of an individual in behalf of a friend. Once we meet with an unusually elaborate form,— "At the request of the neighbours, Suedius Clemens, most upright judge, is working for the election of Marcus Epidius Sabinus as mayor. He begs you to elect this candidate." But the manifestos of a certain importunate laundryman by the name of Vesonius Primus occur in extraordinary numbers. Two

of these read: "Vesonius Primus urges the election of Gn. Helvius as alderman, a man worthy of public office; V. P. requests the election of G. G. F. as mayor, a man serviceable to public interests; do elect him, I beg of you." In another instance he names his own occupation: "Primus the laundryman asks the election of L. C. S. as mayor." Once his household is involved: "Primus and his household are working for the election of G. H. S. as alderman." This energetic fellow belonged assuredly to the type denominated by the Greek comedians *Polypragmon*.

It is interesting to find amid these manifestations of the human element even a place for the god Eros. A brief, but tender, little document runs: "*Claudium duumvirum animula facit*",—which being interpreted reads: "Claudius's little sweetheart is working for his election as mayor." Of course he was elected.

These are a few of the many "political-posters" that adorn the walls of Pompeii. The argument may be presented that what we find here can hardly be typical of Rome in republican times; for the town was but a provincial one, the magistrates mentioned were merely borough officials, and the Empire was fully a century old. But the answer may readily be given, and with truth, that the election methods of the Romans had not changed in many generations, whatever alterations may have taken place in their forms of government; while in viewing the small town one is, as it were, observing Rome herself through the wrong end of the telescope. The hamlet is but the metropolis in miniature.

When, however, election-day arrived and the votes of the people had decided the issue, there followed the formal declaration of the result. That this ceremony was not *purely* formal, as it is in modern times, is revealed through the possibility even then of the disqualification of an unworthy candidate, who had managed by hook or by crook to slip through the earlier stages of election.

An interesting parallel between Roman and American custom is at this point to be observed. After the time of Sulla, the magisterial elections were held universally in the month of July, whereas the elected officials did not enter upon their duties until from four to six months afterwards. We are at once reminded of the fact that the American President who is chosen in November does not enter upon his duties until the following March. Throughout the British Commonwealth of nations, the contrary is, of course, the procedure. In the Roman state, during this interval, the magistrate was technically termed *designatus*, and though his *potestas* or power was necessarily dormant, he had a definite position within the state, and he was able even to anticipate his future period

of administration by issuing edicts which would be binding upon his entry into office. When that time came, he was formally inaugurated; whereupon he became a genuine consul, praetor, quaestor, etc., as the case might be.

The question naturally arises—were the Roman elections reasonably “clean,” in the accepted sense of the word, or was corruption present to an inordinate degree? From what we know of the average Roman, we are inclined to put him down as rather a good sort of fellow, with a conscience fully capable of distinguishing between *malum* and *bonum*, evil and good. But at election-times, with the ancients no less than with the moderns, an unusually severe strain was thrown upon the integrity of elector and elected alike. Hence, we find that the words graft, boodle, and gerrymandering are new terms only from the philologist’s point of view. We have many specific instances of indictment for bribery in campaigns, but what is perhaps most significant of the state of affairs is found in the series of laws which were enacted with a view to checking the evil. As far back as the fourth century, we find legislation concerning bribery, and, throughout the succeeding years and generations, laws relating to this offence were repeatedly passed or amended. In at least one instance the penalty attached was death, but its very severity defeated the law’s own end. Thus, each age was obliged to deal with the malady in its own way. One cannot but feel that, all through, the Roman state was doing its best to deal with something over which it had little control. The very names for canvassing and bribery are suspiciously alike—*ambitio* and *ambitus*—and I am inclined to think that all too often the terms were synonymous.

As touching, then, the customs and the habits of the democracy ancient and modern, the sage and the platitudinarian may well unite in proclaiming, “There is nothing new under the sun”, and “History repeats itself.” God grant that it may all end as that incurable optimist, Mr. H. G. Wells, declares it will! “Votes in themselves”, he asserts, “are worthless things. Men had votes in Italy in the time of the Gracchi. Their votes did not help them. Until a man has education, a vote is a useless and dangerous thing for him to possess. The ideal community toward which we move is not a community of will simply; it is a community of knowledge and will, replacing a community of faith and obedience.”