

Early Political Institutions

From Prof. Jenk's History of Politics

The Council.

WE have seen that in the rude beginnings of monarchy, the host-leader is found always to be surrounded by his followers or companions, men devoted entirely to his service, on the terms that he shall provide them with maintenance, and opportunities for distinction. As the host-leader developed into the king, this body of followers became the council of the kingdom. Placed in the midst of a hostile country, the king and his followers were absolutely essential to one another's safety. Without their support, the king could not hold his conquest; without his master mind, they would fall victims in detail to racial hostility. The success of the king meant the enrichment of his followers; the contentment and prosperity of his followers meant the safety of the king. We may put aside as premature any definite theories about the right of the council, in those early days, to control the actions of the king. All our accounts of the relationship between the early king and his council go to show, that the former, if he choose to run the risk of becoming unpopular, could do what he liked. Although, perhaps, the council gained somewhat in the eyes of the king's subjects by being regarded as the successor of the old tribal council of elders, yet, in reality it was the body of the king's servants, chosen by him at his pleasure. Nevertheless, the existence of the council did soon undoubtedly become a substantial check on the despotic tendencies of the king. A theory grew up, that a good king consulted his council frequently, that he listened to its advice. And from this point the step was comparatively short, to the doctrine that the king ought to consult, and, finally, that he must consult his council. And thus, in reality, the council is the germ of what we call constitutional government. But, long before it became a bulwark of popular liberties, the council had rendered invaluable service to the kingship as an institution, and this in at least four ways.

(a) It preserved the continuity.

Kingship may be perpetual; but, in fact, the individual king dies. And, between the death of one king and the succession of another, there lies a critical moment. The forces of anarchy are ready to break out. "The king died on the following day — then there was tribulation soon in the land, for every man that could forthwith robbed another," says an old chronicler. There is always a chance that old ideas may revive, and set people longing for the good old days when every one did that which was right in his own eyes. We must remember that a successful monarchy does run counter to a good many cherished practices. It does not, for example, permit of blood-feuds or tribal forays; it probably has incurred the resentment of old religions; it has sanctioned practices which ancient prejudice regards as monstrous; it has probably, exacted a good deal of tribute. So there are always people waiting for a good opportunity to revolt against it. But the existence of the council tides over the dangerous moment. Though, in strict

theory, the death of the king dissolves his council; in fact, the members of council hold together, in hopes of being appointed his successor. And, in the meantime, they keep the political machine going.

(b) It preserved the traditions.

One of the greatest dangers to the newly established kingship is, the risk of offending its subjects by exhibition of caprice. It has to deal with a community living according to immemorial custom. It is bound to effect alterations to a certain extent; but, if it is wise, it will do so as little as possible. Above all, it must avoid any unnecessary changes. It is almost better, under some conditions, to persevere in a bad policy, than to change it for a good one. The average man, especially if he be of a patriarchal type, suspect and hates change. But a body of councillors is less likely to be capricious than a single ruler; its members will possibly, have something to lose by a change of policy. Its influence will, in the majority of cases, be against change.

(c) It broke the obloquy.

As we have said, government, especially a newly-established government, is bound to be unpopular, at least to a certain extent. If the whole of the criticism provoked by its acts were to fall on the head of a single individual, his position would become very precarious. But if the blame can be distributed amongst his advisers, or if even, in extreme cases, one or more of these advisers can be sacrificed to the popular discontent, much will be gained by the head of the state. Being an impersonal authority, a council stands criticism much better than an individual. This may not be a very dignified or enjoyable function of the council, but it is a very valuable one from this point of view of the State.

(d) It increases the activity.

The limits of the activity of a single individual are soon reached. Even a king like Frederick the Great cannot know, personally, very much of what is going on in his dominions. But he would know still less if it were not for his councillors. By their own observations, and through their agents, they find out things which are going on, and repeat them to the king. As with knowledge, so with action. The king can personally, do but little. Even in early days, when the king was still in the main, a warrior, he could not personally protect all his dominions at once. Still less could he, when the business of his position became, (as it did become) enormously increased, conduct it all himself. But his council could be increased to any size; and thus he could, as it were, provide himself with an unlimited number of hands.

3. The local agents.

Hitherto we have assumed that the king's councillors have, save for short intervals of absence, surrounded his person, either on the battle-field or in the palace or hall. This was as we have seen, the old idea. The war-leader's companions, in time of peace, fed at his table and lived in his house. And the idea has never been abandoned. The court of the monarch, even in modern times, is actually in attendance on the person of the king. But when the freebooting leader became

the king of a territory, he required supporters, not only round his throne, but also all over his territory. We have already in the preceding chapter, had a glimpse of the readiest plan. The conqueror accepted the allegiance of such of the old patriarchal authorities as were willing to submit to him, and continued them in their old positions, as his representatives. It was a dangerous practice, though, perhaps, less dangerous than forcible dispossession. The king felt safer where the circumstances allowed him to place one of his own trusted followers in the room of a dead or a banished chief. And, as the old nobles died out, the policy of replacing them by the "king's thegns" was steadily pursued, until, by a silent but revolutionary process, the country had been mapped out into districts, each in charge of a representative of the central government. In all probability, the districts themselves would be little changed. In England, for example, the local divisions which existed until the beginning of the present century, represented in the main the ancient units of patriarchal society. The county or shire was, in many cases at least, the district of a tribal settlement — Sussex of the South Saxons, Dorsetshire of the Dorsaetas, Somerset of the Somersaetas, and so on. In other cases, as Dr. Freeman pointed out, it was an artificial district commanded by a fortified town, such as Bedfordshire, Huntingdonshire, Derbyshire, and so on. But this was a much later formation. And there are strong reasons to believe that the hun-

dred, the other great local division of the Middle Ages, will ultimately be proved to have been the territory of a clan. In later times, of course, the subdivision becomes more minute, and we get the single manor, under its lord; but enough has been said to show how feudalism began.

We must not of course, suppose that the man who was placed in charge of a local district was entirely excluded from the Council which surrounded the person of the king. On the contrary, there seems to be little doubt that the greatest of the king's subordinates, the earls in England and Scotland, the dukes and counts on the continent, always sat, as of right, in the Council, at any of its solemn days of sessions. We distinguish in the Witan of the Angle-Saxon kings, beside the royal princes and the great ecclesiastics, two classes of people, the ealdormen and the thegns. The former undoubtedly had a local position as heads of the shires; the latter were probably, the humbler followers of the king, who lived permanently at his court. But it is unlikely that the smaller local representatives, the landed "thegns" (as we may call them) sat in the Council.

To conclude this chapter, we may ask, what were the duties imposed upon these local representatives by the early kings? And we shall hardly get a better answer than by referring once more to the picturesque words of the Heimskringla, which describe Harold Fairhair as subduing all Norway "with scatt, and duties, and lordships."

Egoism or Altruism?

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At last they discovered they would be best off by remaining, not close together, but at a little distance from one another. The same thing occurs, he says, in human society, and hence the English phrase "keep your distance," and also, the man who has sufficient heat (or self-sufficiency?) in himself, prefers to remain where he will neither prick other people nor get pricked himself.

Whatever the faults of the workers — faults, not of their making but due to capitalist conditions — they have certain abstract rights and certain concrete miseries — such as their commodity status. He who mingles with the non-Socialist workers, is in danger of an "argumentum ad hominem" — for their illusions and ignorance cannot fail to disgust those who have raised themselves upon the platform of Socialist Science.

Oscar Wilde was right when he wrote that sympathy with suffering is morbid and tainted with egoism. He says there is in it a certain element of terror for our own safety. We become afraid that we ourselves might be as the leper or as the blind, and that no man would have care of us. But allowing that sympathy ("feeling with") is based on self, when it comes to sympathy with the working class, how exalted it seems to raise one. What worker, or any other person, has a conception of abstract justice (which is more a mathematical than a moral entity) can withhold his disgust and indignation that they who perform the hardest and most necessary toil of society, should yet be milked, outraged and exploited. Think of the miserable plight of the workers, enslaved to those who monopolize the means of living, functioning, actually, not as

human beings, but as commodities, like oranges, to be bought, sucked and cast aside, or allowed to rot when there is no demand for such. Who can withhold his quota of burning admiration when economically weak as they are, they wage some courageous battle for the right to live like human beings, whilst hundreds are inevitably doomed to ruinous defeat in nearly every strike they carry out. The further progress of civilization rests with the working class and every victory they gain is a step nearer to our goal. Let the Socialist ignore their present imperfections and afford them all the help he is gifted with, for, thereby, he is bringing nearer that Socialist Republic which will eliminate the abnormal and the stunted beings of Capitalism. Then will it be a pleasure to consort with and not to avoid (as at present) his fellow men.

PROGRESS.

SOCIALIST MEMBERS ARE DENIED SEATS

Will Be Excluded from the Lower House of New York Assembly

ALBANY, N. Y., Jan. 8.—Five Socialist members of the assembly of the New York State Legislature were denied their seats at the lower branch's opening meeting of the 1920 session on Wednesday. A resolution questioning whether they could be loyal to their oaths of office when bound to act subject to instructions of the Socialist party was passed, 140 to 6.

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