

THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY.

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In every leading country of the world possessing free institutions the party of the people is in despair. American democracy is not peculiar in this; British Liberals are in an even worse plight. The last House of Commons began with a unionist majority of 152 in a membership of 679, a disparity of parties almost unparalleled in England. The present Parliament is nearly as lop-sided. And Liberals there lack leaders, a policy and heart as much as our Democrats do. A party so little robust is unfit even for opposition duty.

This low estate of democratic parties some refer to wrong leadership, others to ill party organization, others to alliance with socialism, and still others to questionable measures which have been urged, as Irish Home Rule yonder, free silver or free trade here.

I venture to pronounce these causes superficial, wholly inadequate to explain the passivity of democracy to-day. It is my belief that democracy droops mainly because political society itself is undergoing a radical change comparable with the rise of feudalism or of absolute monarchy. Democracy of the type which has become familiar to the modern world is passing away, never to return.

The ideas man perfectible, history purposive, humanity a single thing in all epochs, races and classes, struck Europe with the combined might of novelty and of reason. Lodged in the world, they set about conquering it, nor, until recently, has their victorious campaign been seriously checked.

For the conviction of a schism between diverse people and classes to perish of course took time. In the politics of the Middle Ages notions living over from the classic period were ceaselessly at work. Bishops and monks might preach equality as they would, the practical maxim of public policy still was that men are not by nature equal; that there are, by a divine and inevitable arrangement, privileged human beings and pariahs, those to be rich and rule, these to be poor and be ruled.

Only at about the time of the American and French revolutions did the notion of human fraternity secure aught like triumphant recognition in legislation. "What an eventful period is this," exclaims Doctor Price, in a sermon part of which Burke quotes in his "Reflections upon the French Revolution." "I am thankful that I have lived to see it. I could almost say 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation.'"

The notion of the essential equality of human beings became in time the soul of liberalism. Under its stimulus the American constitution was framed. Not one of the many parties known to our history has ever dared gainsay it. It has become the spirit of our law as of our religion. It is preached in our churches. It was the death of African slavery. It is the life and strength of American democracy. It is the belief of the vast majority of our people in every section of the Union.

And of course liberalism is no