

The Party System.

By Hilaire Belloc, M.P., in the "English Review," London.

The machinery of Government in this country has stopped working. It has got clogged, and the wheels won't go round. The cause of this breakdown is the introduction into a machine, the scheme and construction of which is now of one sort, a number of parts and a method of action of a totally different sort. The two cannot agree and the whole thing has stuck.

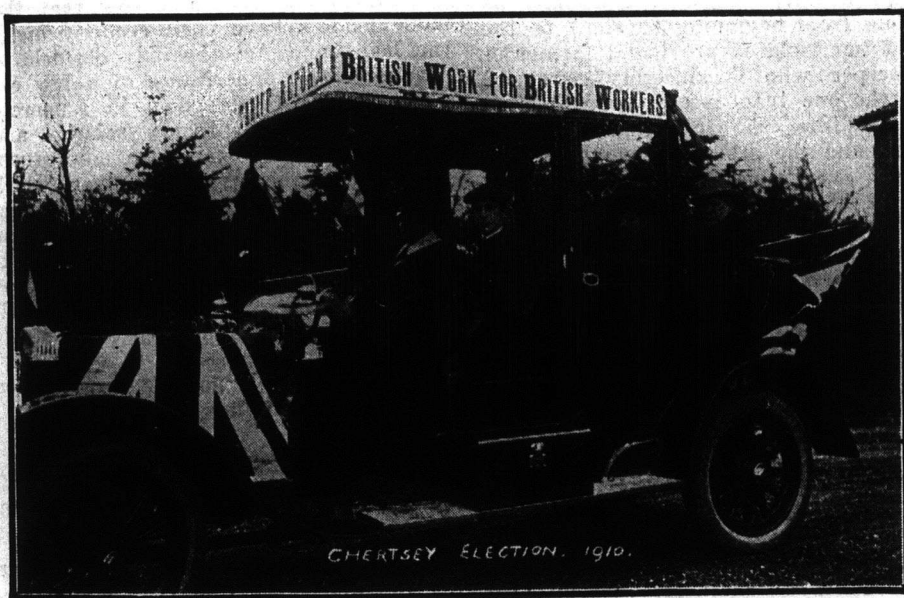
The machinery of Government is today definitely based upon the theory of representation. For three generations that theory has been more and more widely spread, more and more insisted upon in the public mind, and more and more accepted as the essential character of the machine; today it is universal. Side by side with the wider and wider acceptance of that idea, a practice in the running of that machine, at first divergent from and now completely contradictory of the idea of representation, has prevailed. The two could not co-exist and we have come to a deadlock.

The theory of representative Government may be easily stated: The nation is asked to choose a small body of men each of whom shall present in a national council the opinion of the section of the nation which sent him there. The traditional and existing method of representation in the United Kingdom is the choice usually of one, sometimes of two,

almost self-evident that a State in which this principle was forgotten would be a State diseased, and one in which it was not recovered would be a State doomed to death. We are possessed of a machine every one of whose functions is based upon, and co-ordinated by, the theory of representative government, but the practice of working it is so much the negation of that theory that the machine has broken down. To see in what way this has happened it will be well to set down here the method on which it still attempted to conduct the business of the nation. That method is called the Party System, and it works thus:

Two sets of men (the number who really count on either side is less than a dozen) oppose each other as two such sets might oppose each other in any fair and equally balanced game. These two teams form the permanent nucleus of the System. The medium in which they work—the House of Commons—is in a constant state of flux: but the two teams form the staff and their action alone is continuous.

It is the custom of each of these bodies to choose some legislative policy. Sometimes the initiative lies with one, sometimes with the other. On certain occasions (the election of 1906 was one of them) no definite policy is chosen by



ELECTIONEERING IN ENGLAND

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candidates by a majority of votes cast within a particular geographical area. But whatever the method of choice, it has for its object the result just defined, the formation of a national council which shall reflect the national mind and whose decisions (to be arrived at in case of conflict by the decision of the majority) shall be as nearly as possible the expression of the national will.

This theory may be right or wrong. Those who accept it, and still more those who believe in, a representative system defend it by pointing out that, as local isolation has disappeared and the systems of local self-government which are everywhere native to man in the village and the tribe are today impossible; such a central elected body, however imperfect, must be the supreme authority in the State if the citizens are to maintain any control of their own destinies.

A representative assembly so formed needs an Executive and that Executive must be small, for while many can decide it is impossible in human affairs that a great number should actually govern. The great Latin formula which Tacitus puts into the Constitution of his Ideal Primitive Community represents a permanent and necessary condition of healthy politics. 'All are consulted upon major matters, but in minor matters the rulers decide.' It is

either side, and the appeal becomes largely a personal one. But, as a rule, elections are held throughout the country upon two contrasted policies. Every precaution is taken that the electors shall have no opportunity of hearing arguments concerning any other points than the two points chosen by the players. The candidates for election are concerned for the major part of their interest and speeches with the programme laid down by the two Front Benches, and on this the counting of the votes takes place. Sometimes the electorate gets a little out of hand (as, for instance, in 1909, on the subject of Chinese labor), and it is part of the game to study such rare spontaneous movements closely, but in general an election turns upon the issues decided by the chief players.

It must be here remarked that at first the policy proposed may or may not be serious. Sometimes one of the teams believes it possible to carry into law a proposal upon which an appeal is made. Sometimes one, sometimes the other, and occasionally both, have no intention of carrying their programme into law; but this matter of sincerity is not regarded as germane to the business, which is to obtain for the one or the other programme to which either team is 'pledged' (as the phrase goes) a majority of seats in the House of



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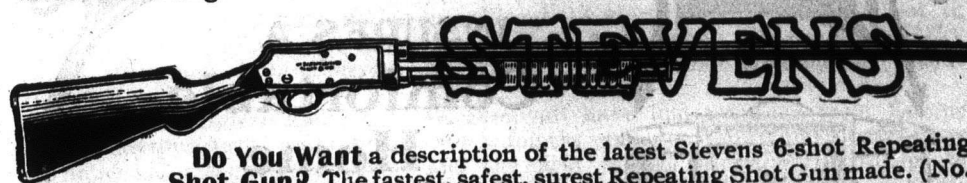
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