

Compulsory Voting Advocated in France

A movement for a compulsory voting law, such as has been discussed at various times in the United States and Canada has been started in France. Its proponents hope to shove it through the fall and winter session of the Parliament in order to have it in operation for the Parliamentary elections of the spring of next year.

For, according to the wiseacre, the "abstentionism" now being widely practised in France is becoming a real national danger. The eligible voters—"electeurs"—are it appears living up to the letter of the real but unofficial national motto, which, literally translated, is, "I should give a damn"; more politely, "I should fret." In the majority of recent by-elections a second turn at balloting has been necessary in order to give an absolute majority to any one list of candidates. In many cases these elections turned out far less than half the number of registered voters for the first polling—and that in spite of the stipulations of the 1913 electoral law, which sent the present Chamber up to Paris.

The lead has been taken by Deputy Joseph Barthélemy, of the Department of Gers, who already has put in his bill. But although he has been promised a full discussion of it after the present vacation, he has not much hope that it will go through. The normal desire of a deputy in office is to be re-elected; the same holds good for a congressman. It may be added; and M. Barthélemy's colleagues are considered pretty apt to stick to the present system—the one that returned them to the Palais Bourbon.

Meanwhile the "gentleman from Gers" is pursuing an active campaign. He flatly takes issue with all the fathers of the Revolution, who held the franchise to be a right, of which the citizen voter could avail himself or not as he saw fit. This briefly is his line of argument:

"If there are, in fact, rights whose exercise is discretionary—the right to marry or the right to make a will—there are others, the exercise of which is obligatory. The democratic principle stipulates that the reasoning being should only be governed by himself and his proper reasoning. Therefore the suffrage, as universal as it is practically possible, is the positive solution which approaches nearest to the ideal. The laws, it has been said, are made in the interest of those who make the law-makers. In order that the laws shall be made in the interest of all, then all must make the law-makers."

"If the citizen has the right to vote he holds it not in his own exclusive personal interest. The collective, social interest is also engaged. In these conditions the only question of principle worthy of being discussed is 'Is it opportune to constrain the voters to approach the electoral urns?'"

"Whether the franchise is a right or a function, the exercise of it is unanimously considered a civic duty. To be sure, a private duty remains discretionary. We cannot imitate Saxon legislation which pretends to impose virtue by force, just as one injects vaccine. But here we are concerned not with a private duty, but with a social duty, the performance of which binds the citizen as a member of the society at large. Society, in its turn, has the right and the duty to defend itself."

M. Barthélemy, as the foregoing extracts indicate, is a law professor in private life and a convinced democrat in public life.

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