

Public Opinion and Government

(By Prof. J. A. DALE.)

In a democratic state the will of the people is the guiding principle of government. How is this will to be ascertained? How is it to be interpreted and put into practice? How again can good public opinion be fostered? These are questions of the greatest practical importance. What do the people want? Do they want the right things? Who is the judge, and what the grounds of judgment? These questions are the hope and despair of those who wish well for the state. Hope—because of the democratic faith that people on the whole wish well, when all allowance is made for the conditions which may warp their judgment; despair—because of the difficulty of getting a clear verdict in terms which can be translated into legislation.

The difficulty is increased by the complicated organization of the modern state. Some sort of public opinion is easily obtained in the simple and clear constitution of an autocratic or slave state, where a body of ideas is impressed on the people for their obedience, and all opposition crushed. The conditions of a modern industrial democracy make this sort of unanimity impossible, and raise the problems of government in an acute form. First, labor can be concentrated in special place and for special work. This happens in all the functions of the state: most men are compelled to specialize, because the degree of efficiency or the amount of knowledge required is beyond their capacity or opportunity. Hence their whole experience, and their philosophy of life is specialized also. This would not create much difficulty, if that experience and philosophy were not to be used as the definite basis of government—if for example the government were entrusted to a class of specialists in the whole art, such as the "guardians" of Plato. The other factor is the spread of education, which means the power to form and express opinion. The divergent experience of the different citizens, combined with their numerically equal power to express and influence opinion and legislation, is the ideal basis of democracy. In practice the divergence is so great as to breed a sense of injustice and hostility which makes social co-operation impossible. This is the trouble in most states to-day.

At the same time the whole business of government gets more and more complicated, as it is less exclusively occupied by offence and defence, and enters more and more (in spite of all interruptions) into the organization of public welfare and the investment of national resources.

Hence the basis of state action seems to be wide, and hard to concentrate. Any section through the mind of the people reveals a number of centres of diverging or conflicting interests, more or less well organized within themselves, but not into a common will. Among these a large number of agencies are at work for the formation and expression of opinion—official and unofficial, interested and disinterested; in the newspapers, in the pulpits, in countless meetings, in Parliament, in Government departments, men are attempting to form and express the will of the people as they see it. So far at least as numbers go, there is no lack of voices. The resulting chaos is shocking to the martinet type of mind; it gives great scope to the unscrupulous politician, who makes a fine art of fishing in troubled waters. But it gives hope to the democrat, who looks for some eventual resultant of all these conflicting energies. It makes government difficult; but that is the problem of democracy.

STUDY PERSONAL OPINION.

We can best see both the difficulty and the way out of it, if we study the formation of our own personal opinion. By heredity, by associations of all kinds material and moral, we reconstruct each for himself the world of his experience. Here also as in the state we find divergent even conflicting centres of interest. We are each a bundle of selves. Every man makes his own adjustment, which gives him such measure of efficiency and peace as he is able to compass. Our action and thought are the resultant of our various motives, a balance which we may achieve in many ways—by deliberate "water-tighting" of our "compartments," or the mortification of one self for the benefit of another, or the chance development of one under the favor of circumstance. But the ideal toward which every thinking man strives is to make

this thought approach consistency, and urge his experience of contradictions as far as he can. To do this, he will face the facts of life with the utmost frankness, honestly testing all explanations, trying to be sure that even the "hardest" facts and loudest voices are not really shadows and echoes; or (changing the parable from Plato to Hans Anderson), determined to find out whether, in spite of all the people say, the Emperor really has any clothes on at all. Thus the world of appearance is organized and rebuilt into reality by making the explanations of it as constant as possible. I imagine a new Erewhon where if a man found his world of thought as divided against itself as is the industrial state, he would go at once to a Straightener recognizing the seriousness of his case, and ask for the discipline that will cure him.

This inner harmony is not obtainable in perfection; but the degree of its attainment is the spiritual measure of freedom.

So also there are very many ways of approaching harmony within the state, and there the degree of its attainment is the political measure of freedom.

There are two main lines of approach, followed by (a) those who believe that the common welfare is best served by individual freedom, so that the object of legislation is to remove all possible restrictions, (b) those who believe it best achieved by restricting individual freedom, so that the object of legislation is to create a wise organization to secure a higher general result at some cost of liberty. Both individualist and collectivist may desire a form of society in which the best life is possible for the individual up to his capacity; but they differ sharply as to the way towards it, and sometimes even as to its nature. This is partly due to a broad difference in men's temperaments; as W. S. Gilbert says:

Every boy and every gal
That's born into this world alive,
Is either a little Liberal
Or a little Conservative.

They are not, however, mutually exclusive. They refer to a difference in the balance of tendencies usually both present. How many a politician is Radical on the hustings and Conservative at home! And the balance shifts regularly in all but the most extreme doctrinaires, under the influence of the second factor in the opposition. The full practical effects of the change are not within the view of either its advocates or assailants. The prophets, whether of Immediate Ruin or Immediate Prosperity, find little fulfilment. Experience gradually reveals the practical bearings, and deeper moral consequences. These are frequently sufficiently unexpected and striking to unsettle the previous balance, and steadily shift the ground of a man's hope from faith in individual freedom, to faith in the superior intelligence of the state, or vice versa. The course of legislation in England since the Reform Bill of 1832 clearly shows this alternation. Public opinion is gradually concentrated on some change; by the time it has reached the point of legislation, opinion is already beginning to focus on the effects of that change, which are gradually becoming clearer and demanding modification.

The trend of legislation in the 20th century has been increasingly collectivist so far, and has entered an enormous field of state business. Here public opinion meets a new difficulty due to the need of expert direction and large bodies of officials. These men inevitably get out of touch with the mind of the people in adapting themselves to changed circumstances. They become executive specialists. The bureaucrat of to-day is like the "guardian" of Plato already referred to; but with the vital difference that he is a specialist in one section only or one sub-section only, of government.

To instruct and check its executive, democracy gives power to majorities, with various qualifications. In order to obtain the widest basis of judgment it is widening everywhere the franchise. At the same time it is experimenting with the mode of representation, in order to get if possible the actual voice of each section of the people direct. Representation is too often misrepresentation. It is thinking over ways of giving to minorities a voice pro-