

STATISM AND INDIVIDUALISM

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IN 1806 it was my fortune to address the Fifteen Club, which was in a sense the predecessor of the Canada First League, on certain aspects of the question of the influence of constitutional forms upon national development. On that occasion I began my remarks with the quotation of a somewhat famous passage from the Diderot of John Morley in which that eminent man says that: "The economic conditions of a country, and the administration of its laws, are far more vitally related to its well-being than the form of its government." I then went on to say that great upheavals and consequent changes of government, such, for instance, as the French Revolution, had often not produced the results expected of them and attributed to them. I quoted from great economic authorities, like the Vicomte d'Avenel, to show that working men's wages, for instance, had for centuries in France remained substantially at the same level of purchasing power, and I showed with only too great ease that taxation and the public debt had, under the Republic, been enormously increased. It was easy to show that waste in administration, due to favoritism and other forms of political corruption, had not diminished since the days of the Ancien Régime. If I were discussing the same question to-day, I could also say with great relevancy that ancient diplomacy was not more secret, arbitrary and elusive than that of modern times.

Finally, I thought I saw in the fact—patent to all—that greater public discontent prevailed in 1806 than in 1789, a strong proof of the view that a Republic was not more satisfactory than a Monarchy. And discussing the question to-day one might say that all the changes in constitutions, codes, enactments and regulations had not prevented the nations from indulging in a huge and senseless war which has cost millions of lives and has nearly if not quite, bankrupted the world.

Human government has indeed but little to its credit to-day, any more than it had in 1806. But in spite of that fact it is quite wonderful how the greater part of the world persists in respecting its elected deliberative bodies. No matter how inefficient, corrupt and vulgar parliaments and cabinets become, no matter how many improvident enterprises are engaged in, we still render them honor and obedience. But it may not be so always. Society does seem at times to be on the brink of an abyss, into which it may thrust its time-honored governmental forms. It would not be surprising if the party of anarchy were much stronger than it really is. If men in high position do not act wisely and with decorum, there may be upheavals of a serious kind, which will work out disastrous results.

But in spite of this fact the number of those who seem to realize what a broken reed government is, must be small, for the great mass of expressed opinion is in favor of increasing its power and importance, and it is interesting to discuss why this is so. If we analyze society a little from this