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W. Cunningham

Excerpt

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THE COMMON WEAL

I

NATIONALITY AND SOVEREIGNTY

I. INTRODUCTION

I. The term Common Weal may sound a little archaic, but it is not an inappropriate description of the subject of lectures which aim at showing how we may bring the concentrated experience of past ages to bear on the political difficulties of the present day. The term takes us far back, for it has been associated with the projects of the Kentish Peasants who agitated, once and again, for better government¹. The insurrection of which we know most was that under Wat Tyler in 1381, and it was the striking outcome of widespread discontent with the existing order in Church and State; there is real difficulty in getting at the root of these troubles. We are fortunate, however, in being able to discern, at least dimly, something of the positive aims of the insurgents. They were aiming not merely at the redress of their own particular grievances, whatever they may have been, but at the Common Weal of

¹ "Gregory's Chronicle" in *Historical Collections of a Citizen of London*, edited by J. Gairdner for the Camden Society, p. 191.

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the nation as a whole,—of all localities and of all classes; and so they were ready to follow the king when he adroitly took the place of their dead leader at Mile End and shouted “I will be your leader.” The particularism of mediaeval England was the root of every sort of evil. The malcontents had had enough of the jealousies of different towns, of the quarrels of different guilds and the ambitions of privileged classes, of the disputed customs of different estates, the disabilities of the serfs and the claims of the free labourers,—and they were ready to look to the king, as one who, by his position, was raised above these rival forces and might be expected to have regard for the Common Weal of the nation as a whole.

2. That they were disappointed in their expectation, we know; but the failure need not be dismissed as a forgotten futility, for we may have the keenest sympathy with the object they had in view. During the last few years many of us have been dissatisfied with Party Government and the subordination of the good of the country as a whole to the interests of particular groups or classes; we desire a change in our system of rule, so that greater prominence may be given to the good of the nation, present and future; and we have much clearer light than the Peasants in 1381, as to the means by which this may be accomplished. During the five centuries and more, that have elapsed, since Wat Tyler’s Rebellion, there has been an extraordinary

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development of the art of government,—a very much better understanding of what it is worth while to aim at, and a vastly improved machinery for attaining these aims. All would agree that remarkable progress has occurred in the country during the last three centuries, and it is worth while to enumerate the main changes which have taken place.

(A) There has been a great increase of personal liberty,—of freedom from external coercion,—and therefore of opportunities to the individual for self-discipline. So long as external control was constantly enforced by authority, the basis for the formation of habits of self-control was absent, and there could be no real reliance on self-discipline by the citizens themselves.

(B) It is also noticeable that the activities of the State have been called into operation in new directions; such elements of the Common Weal as health and education are taken account of by the State now-a-days, in a way to which our forefathers were quite unaccustomed. The whole of the humanitarian legislation, which was the product of the philanthropy of the nineteenth century, would have been regarded as impracticable and unnecessary at an earlier time.

(C) There has also been a change in the conception of sovereignty as the power which interprets and enforces the Common Weal. Modern thought is clearer and more definite, and modern ideas are

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more fruitful; we are able to set the problems, with which we have to deal, in a clearer light, so as to have the best hope of solving them practically, and making still further advances in promoting and fostering the Common Weal.

3. A retrospect of progress in the past, helps to give us the right point of view for discussing the possibilities of the future. We are apt to be mistaken if we allow ourselves to be guided solely by our own preferences and temperaments in regard to political movements long ago, for they have been judged by the logic of events. Certain institutions have justified themselves by their success, while others have proved to be failures, and are to be condemned as failures. The personal sympathies and interests of the historian will of course differ according to his temperament. The vulgar will find satisfaction in praising those who were successful, and the chivalrous will show sympathy with failure; but, apart from these matters of temperament, the fact of success or failure is clear. Personal monarchy was proved a failure in England when Charles I was executed; to try to understand, as fully as we can, the precise causes of failure is an education in being fair to those with whom we may have little sympathy. Similarly in regard to the future we need not rely entirely on our own conceptions of what is right and just, but should look chiefly at what is practicable, as a step towards realising our ideal for the Common Weal. Our conception of abstract

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justice gives us little help in facing the complex difficulties of society, and we are more likely to get on if we are content to consider what, under existing circumstances, is expedient for the good of the country as we see it.

There have of course been attempts to carry out what is "absolutely just" in the founding and governing of the State¹. But individuals differ greatly as to their conception of what is just as between man and man. Is it just that goods should be distributed among people according to their needs? or according to their efficiency? Are we to take the idea of justice

¹ Penn claimed to be carrying out the dictates of absolute justice in the organisation of Pennsylvania (H. Hodgkin, *Westminster Review*, June, 1901, CLV, p. 616), but it is to his credit that he did not adhere pedantically to his Quaker principles. He was obliged to compromise, for he had established a democracy though he was himself a feudal Sovereign (Bancroft, *United States*, II, p. 395). He was not a thorough-going opponent of slavery. "He endeavoured to secure to the African mental and moral culture, the rights and happiness of domestic life. His efforts were not successful, and he himself died a slave holder" (*Ib.* II, p. 403). The Welsh settlers did not regard him as punctilious in carrying out the agreement into which he had entered (C. H. Browning, *Welsh Settlement of Pennsylvania*, p. 330). The peace with the Indians did not depend entirely on the treaty with Penn, but was partly due to the fact that the tribe had been already disarmed by the Five Nations (*Dictionary of National Biography* s.v. Penn, xv, p. 758); before his death Penn felt obliged to organise a system of defence. It is impossible to regard the success of Pennsylvania, as a proof that his principles were sound, as he did not really rely on them in practice.

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to the individual, which was on the whole mediaeval, or that which has superseded it in modern times?¹ We may avoid confusion by leaving this question of absolute right on one side, and fixing our attention instead on the practical progress which has been made; we may thus consider what we have learned as a nation from experience,—what maxims have been accepted because they seemed to work well for a time, and what have been discarded because they had come to work badly. In this way we can account for the extraordinary progress which has been made in forming definite ideals of the Common Weal, while we have also learned by experience to find better means of realising these ideals.

4. The experience has, of course, been in an area where there were similar institutions and similar powers of control,—in fact, where there was a consciousness of nationality. Since Edwardian times, at all events, England has been a true nationality; and this involves the recognition of a Common Weal throughout a given territorial area. There are many peoples who have not attained to this consciousness of nationality. In England, from various causes, it awoke much earlier than in Scotland²; on the Continent, the middle of the nineteenth century is spoken of as the time of the rise of nation-

¹ *Christianity and Economic Science*, p. 29.

² Under Wallace and Bruce there was an assertion of independence from England, but there was little development of national institutions till the sixteenth century.

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alities, with a resuscitated Greece, a united Italy, and a united Germany. There are peoples who flourish under other political forms,—who are organised according to a blood tie, like the clans of Scotland, or who are content with the civic patriotism which was developed in the ancient world and maintained in the Middle Ages. Tribes or groups, which are satisfied with these groupings and find that they are the basis of a congenial society, are not desirous of a really national life and are unfitted for national institutions. The maintenance or revival of racial feeling is a hindrance to the growth of enthusiasm for a Common Weal in the Balkan States, and therefore to the organisation of true nationalities. During the last century there has been in America a struggle between State patriotism and State rights, and the conception of a Common Weal and true nationality for the whole of the United States. But in England there have been national life and national experience which have been growing steadily for centuries and of which we should be wise to avail ourselves.

II. NATIONALITY

5. How far we have moved in this matter can perhaps best be seen by taking the Reformation Period as a starting-point. The reign of Edward VI was a time of widespread disorder, but the various grievances of the rural and urban population were very different from those of the present

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day. Agriculture was awakening to new life under the stimulus of improved opportunities for sale of produce, and capitalist organisation of wage earners was beginning to take the place which had been traditionally occupied by independent domestic workers. The capitalist system, which has triumphed both in town and country, was coming clearly into light, and the conflict between the old order and the new was very bitter¹. The grievances of the day were quite different from the social disabilities of the Peasants of 1381, or from the labour unrest of our own time, and the aims of social reformers were indefinite and vague. The situation is clearly described in the very interesting book, in the form of a dialogue, which was written in 1549, by John Hales, and entitled *A Discourse of the Common Weal of this Realm of England*². The 'knight' in this dialogue was eager to organise the religious life of the nation in independence of Rome, and to develop the economic life of the country as a whole, both as regards rural and urban industry, and by the increase of commerce, so far as it reacted on the employment of the population at home. At that time the reigning dynasty had abandoned the am-

¹ *Progress of Capitalism in England*, p. 52.

² Edited for the Camb. Univ. Press by E. Lamond. It was first printed by an unknown W. S. in 1581; he had brought it down to date and introduced an interesting discussion on the effect of the precious metals from the New World. In this form it is easily accessible in the *Harleian Miscellany*, vol. IX (1808).

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bition for foreign conquests, and there was little fear of foreign invasion. England seemed able to hold aloof from international complications, as Henry VII had done; but soon after, during the reign of Elizabeth, there was a change which gave greater definiteness to the conception of the Common Weal. Defence of our shores by a navy came to be recognised as an essential element, in a way that it had never been since the time of the Danish invasions. The independence of the religious life of the nation was threatened by the Pope, the independence of the economic life of the country was threatened by the peaceful penetration of aliens, and by the Hanse league. It was in the reign of Elizabeth that Englishmen attained to full consciousness of nationality as involving these elements of independence in opposition to aggression from without. Freedom from foreign monarchy was passionately desired, especially from the sovereignty of Spain, and there was a consciousness that independent monarchy would prove a bulwark which ensured freedom for the development of national life.

6. What had been implicit in the very idea of nationality and the Common Weal of the nation, came clearly into view in the time of Elizabeth; and it was generally felt that in order that the nation might be well governed and well organised there must be sovereignty,—that a governing power to act for the Common Weal must be recog-

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nised and obeyed, and that the monarchy should be accepted as having a real regard for the Common Weal and the power of protecting the Common Weal. The altered political conditions were reflected by the change which may be recognised in Political Philosophy. There had of course been much discussion during the Middle Ages of the Theory of Sovereignty; the treatise of Suarez¹ had become a recognised authority on sovereignty in general; but the claim to independent sovereignty over particular nations was comparatively new in Christendom. The views of post-reformation writers, even where general in form, are greatly affected by the particular experiences they had had themselves, and the political conditions in which they lived.

What strikes us most in looking back on the Elizabethan age, is the passionate loyalty, of statesmen and churchmen and the people at large, to the Queen; she was extraordinarily popular in spite of her vanities and vacillation, and of the meanness which characterised her, because she was recognised as being, at that time, the embodiment of the sovereignty which was essential for organising the Common Weal of the realm. In her day there was no occasion, in the ordinary mind, to separate the idea of sovereignty,—as necessary to the existence of a well ordered society,—from the personality by whom that sovereignty was exercised. It could be held that while some other form of government

¹ *Tractatus de legibus*, 1619.