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The Cult of Incompetence

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THE CULT OF INCOMPETENCE

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THE CULT OF INCOMPETENCE

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THE CULT OF INCOMPE- TENCE.

INTRODUCTION.

Though it may not have been possible in the following pages to reproduce the elegant and incisive style of a master of French prose, not even the inadequacies of a translation can obscure the force of his argument. The only introduction, therefore, that seems possible must take the form of a request to the reader to study M. Faguet's criticism of modern democracy with the daily paper in his hand. He will then see, taking chapter by chapter, how in some aspects the phenomena of English democracy are identical with those described in the text, and how in others our English worship of incompetence, moral and technical, differs considerably from that which prevails in France. It might have been possible, as a part of the scheme of this volume, to note on each page, by way of illustration, instances from contemporary English practice, but an adequate execution of this plan would have overloaded [2] the text, or even required an additional volume. Such a volume, impartially worked out with instances drawn from the programme of all political parties, would be an interesting commentary on current political controversy, and it is to be hoped that M. Faguet's suggestive pages will inspire some competent hand to undertake the task.

If M. Faguet had chosen to refer to England, he might, perhaps, have cited the constitution of this country, as it existed some seventy years ago, as an example of a "demophil aristocracy," raised to power by an "aristocracy-respecting democracy." It is not perhaps wise in political controversy to compromise our liberty of action in respect of the problems of the present time, by too deferential a reference to a golden age which probably, like Lycurgus in the text, p. 73, never existed at all, but it has been often stated, and undoubtedly with a certain amount of truth, that the years between 1832 and 1866 were the only period in English history during which philosophical principles were allowed an important, we cannot say a

paramount, authority over English legislation. The characteristic features of the period were [3] a determination to abolish the privileges of the few, which, however, involved no desire to embark on the impossible and inequitable task of creating privileges for the many; a deliberate attempt to extirpate the servile dependence of the old poor law, and a definite abandonment of the plan of distributing economic advantages by eleemosynary state action. This policy was based on the conviction that personal liberty and freedom of private enterprise were the adequate, constructive influences of a progressive civilisation. Too much importance has perhaps been attached to the relatively unimportant question of the freedom of international trade, for this was only part of a general policy of emancipation which had a much more far-reaching scope. Rightly understood the political philosophy of that time, put forward by the competent statesmen who were then trusted by the democracy, proclaimed the principle of liberty and freedom of exchange as the true solvents of the economic problems of the day. This policy remained in force during the ministry of Sir R. Peel and lasted right down to the time of the great budgets of Mr. Gladstone. [4]

If we might venture, therefore, to add another to the definitions of Montesquieu, we might say that the principle animating a liberal constitutional government was liberty, and that this involved a definite plan for enlarging the sphere of liberty as the organising principle of civil society. To what then are we to impute the decadence from this type into which parliamentary government seems now to have fallen? Can we attribute this to neglect or to exaggeration of its animating principle, as suggested in the formula of Montesquieu? It is a question which the reader may find leisure to investigate; we confine ourselves to marking what seem to be some of the stages of decay.

When the forces of destructive radicalism had done their legitimate work, it seemed a time for rest and patience, for administration rather than for fresh legislation and for a pause during which the principles of liberty and free exchange might have been left to organise the equitable distribution of the inevitably increasing wealth of the country. The patience and the conviction which were needed to allow of such a development, rightly or wrongly, were not forthcoming, and politicians and parties [5] have not been want-

ing to give effect to remedies hastily suggested to and adopted by the people. Political leaders soon came to realise that recent enfranchisements had added a new electorate for whom philosophical principles had no charm. At a later date also, Mr. Gladstone, yielding to a powerful and not over-scrupulous political agitation, suddenly determined to attempt a great constitutional change in the relations between the United Kingdom and Ireland. Whether the transference of the misgovernment of Ireland from London to Dublin would have had results as disastrous or as beneficial as disputants have asserted, may be matter for doubt, but the manner in which the proposal was made certainly had one unfortunate consequence. Mr. Gladstone's action struck a blow at the independence and self-respect, or as M. Faguet terms it, the moral competence of our parliamentary representation from which it has never recovered. Men were called on to abandon, in the course of a few hours, opinions which they had professed for a lifetime and this not as the result of conviction but on the pressure of party discipline. Political feeling ran high. [6] The "Caucus" was called into more active operation. Political parties began to invent programmes to capture the groundlings. The conservative party, relinquishing its useful function of critic, revived the old policy of eleemosynary doles, and, in an unlucky moment for its future, has encumbered itself with an advocacy of the policy of protection. For strangely enough the democracy, the bestower of power, though developing symptoms of fiscal tyranny and a hatred of liberty in other directions clings tenaciously to freedom of international trade—for the present at least—and it would seem that the electioneering caucus has, in this instance, failed to understand its own business. The doles of the new State-charity were to be given to meet contributions from the beneficiaries, but as the class which for one reason or another is ever in a destitute condition, could not or would not contribute, the only way in which the benevolent purpose of the agitation could be carried out was by bestowing the dole gratuitously. The flood gates, therefore, had to be opened wider, and we have been and still are exposed to a rush of philanthropic legislation which is gradually transfer [7] ring all the responsibilities of life from the individual to the state. Free trade for the moment remains, and it is supposed to be strongly entrenched in the convictions of the liberal party. Its position, however, is obviously very precarious in view of the de-

mands made by the militant trade unions. These, in their various spheres, claim a monopoly of employment for their members, to the exclusion of those who do not belong to their associations. Logic has something, perhaps not much, to do with political action, and it is almost inconceivable that a party can go on for long holding these two contradictory opinions. Which of them will be abandoned, the future only can tell.

The result of all this is a growing disinclination on the part of the people to limit their responsibilities to their means of discharging them, the creation of a proletariat which in search of maintenance drifts along the line of least resistance, dependence on the government dole. In the end too it must bring about the impoverishment of the state, which is ever being called on to undertake new burdens; for the individual, thus released from obligation to [8] discharge, is still left free to create responsibilities, for which it is now the business of the State to make provision. Under such a system the ability to pay as well as the number of the solvent citizens must continuously decline.

The proper reply to this legislation which we describe as predatory in the sense that we describe the benevolent habits of Robin Hood as predatory, cannot be made by the official opposition which was itself the first to step on the down grade, and which only waits the chances of party warfare to take its turn in providing *panem et circenses* at the charge of the public exchequer. In this way, progress is brought to a standstill by the chronic unwillingness of the rate- and tax-payers to find the money. A truer policy, based on the voluntary action of citizens and capable of indefinite and continuous expansion, finds no support among politicians, for all political parties seem to be held in the grip of the moral and technical incompetence which M. Faguet has so wittily described. The only reply to a government bent on such courses is that which above has been imputed—perhaps without sufficient justification—to the governments of the period [9] 1832-1866; and that reply democracy, as at present advised, will allow no political party to make.

There does not appear, therefore, to be much difference between the situation here and in France, and it is very interesting to notice how in various details there is a very close parallelism between

events in this country and those which M. Faguet has described. The position of our Lord Chancellor, who has been bitterly attacked by his own party, in respect of his appointment of magistrates, is very similar to that of M. Barthou, quoted on p. 118. Our judicial system has hitherto been considered free from political partisanship, but very recently and for the first time a minister in his place in parliament, has rightly or wrongly seen fit to call in question the impartiality of our judicial bench, and the suspicion, if, as appears to be the case, it is widely entertained by persons heated in political strife, will probably lead to appointments calculated to ensure reprisals. Astute politicians do not commit themselves to an attack on a venerated institution, till they think they know that that institution is becoming unpopular with the followers [10] who direct their policy. Criminal verdicts also, especially on the eve of an election, are now made liable to revision by ministers scouring the gaols of the country in search of picturesque malefactors whom, with an accompaniment of much philanthropic speech, they proceed to set at liberty. Even the first principles of equity, as ordinarily understood, seem to have lost their authority, when weighed in the balance against the vote of the majority. Very recently the members of an honourable and useful profession represented to a minister that his extension of a scheme of more or less gratuitous relief to a class which hitherto had been able and willing to pay its way, was likely to deprive them of their livelihood. His reply, *inter alia*, contained the argument that the class in question was very numerous and had many votes, and that he doubted whether any one would venture to propose its exclusion except perhaps a member for a university; as a matter of fact some such proposal had been made by one of the university members whose constituents were affected by the proposal. The minister further declared that he did not think that such an amendment could obtain a [11] seconder. The argument seems to impute to our national representatives a cynical disregard of equity, and a blind worship of numbers, which if true, is an instance of moral incompetence quite as remarkable as anything contained in M. Faguet's narrative.

If readers of this volume will take the trouble to annotate their copies with a record of the relevant incidents which meet them every day of their lives, they cannot fail to acknowledge how terribly

inevitable is the rise of incompetence to political power. The tragedy is all the more dreadful, when we recognise, as we all must, the high character and ability of the statesmen and politicians who lie under the thrall of this compelling necessity.

This systematic corruption of the best threatens to assume the proportions of a national disaster. It is the system, not the actors in it, which M. Faguet analyses and invites us to deplore.

THE PRINCIPLES OF FORMS OF GOVERNMENT.

The question has often been asked, what is the animating principle of different forms of government, for each, it is assumed, has its own principle. In other words, what is the general idea which inspires each political system?

Montesquieu, for instance, proved that the *principle* of monarchy is *honour*, the principle of despotism *fear*, the principle of a republic *virtue* or patriotism, and he added with much justice that governments decline and fall as often by carrying their principle to excess, as by neglecting it altogether.

And this, though a paradox, is true. At first sight it may not be obvious how a despotism can fall by inspiring too much fear, or a constitutional monarchy by developing too highly the sentiment of honour, or a republic by having too much virtue. It is nevertheless true.

To make too common a use of fear is to destroy its efficacy. As Edgar Quinet happily [13] puts it: "If we want to make use of fear we must be certain that we can use it always." We cannot have too much honour, but when we can appeal to this sentiment only and when distinctions, decorations, orders, ribbons—in a word *honours*—are multiplied, inasmuch as we cannot increase such things indefinitely, those who have none become as discontented as those who, having some, want more.

Finally we cannot, of course, have too much virtue, and naturally here governments will fall not by exaggerating but by abandoning their guiding principle. Yet is it not sometimes true that by demanding from citizens too great a devotion to their country, we end by exhausting human powers of endurance and sacrifice? This is what happened in the case of Napoleon, who, perhaps unwittingly, required too much from France, for the building up of a 'Greater France.'

But that, some one will object, was not a republic!

From the point of view of the sacrifices required from the citizen, it was a republic, similar to the Roman Republic and to the French Republic of 1792. All the talk was [14] 'for the glory of our country,' 'heroism, heroism, nothing but heroism!' If too much is required of it, civic virtue can be exhausted.

It is, then, very true that governments perish just as much from an excess as from a neglect of their appropriate principle. Montesquieu without doubt borrowed his general idea from Aristotle, who remarks not without humour, "Those, who think that they have discovered the basis of good government, are apt to push the consequences of their new found principle too far. They do not remember that disproportion in such matters is fatal. They forget that a nose which varies slightly from the ideal line of beauty appropriate for noses, tending slightly towards becoming a hook or a snub, may still be of fair shape and not disagreeable to the eye, but if the excess be very great, all symmetry is lost, and the nose at last ceases to be a nose at all." This law of proportion holds good with regard to every form of government.

Starting from these general ideas, I have often wondered what principle democrats have adopted for the form of government which they [15] favour, and it has not required a great effort on my part to arrive at the conclusion that the principle in question is the worship and cultivation, or, briefly 'the cult' of incompetence or inefficiency.

Let us examine any well-managed and successful business firm or factory. Every employee does the work he knows and does best, the skilled workman, the accountant, the manager and the secretary, each in his place. No one would dream of making the accountant change places with a commercial traveller or a mechanic.

Look too at the animal world. The higher we go in the scale of organic existence, the greater the division of labour, the more marked the specialisation of physiological function. One organ thinks, another acts, one digests, another breathes. Now is there such a thing as an animal with only one organ, or rather is there any animal, consisting of only one organ, which breathes and thinks and digests all at the same time? Yes, there is. It is called the *amœba*, and the

amœba is the very lowest thing in the animal world, very inferior even to a vegetable.

In the same way, without doubt, in a well [16] constituted society, each organ has its definite function, that is to say, administration is carried on by those who have learnt how to administer, legislation and the amendment of laws by those who have learnt how to legislate, justice by those who have studied jurisprudence, and the functions of a country postman are not given to a paralytic. Society should model itself on nature, whose plan is specialisation. "For," as Aristotle says, "she is not niggardly, like the Delphian smiths whose knives have to serve for many purposes, she makes each thing for a single purpose, and the best instrument is that which serves one and not many uses." Elsewhere he says, "At Carthage it is thought an honour to hold many offices, but a man only does one thing well. The legislator should see to this, and prevent the same man from being set to make shoes and play the flute." A well-constituted society, we may sum up, is one where every function is not confided to every one, where the crowd itself, the whole body social, is not told: "It is your business to govern, to administer, to make the laws, &c." A society, where things are so arranged, is an amœbic society. [17]

That society, therefore, stands highest in the scale, where the division of labour is greatest, where specialisation is most definite, and where the distribution of functions according to efficiency is most thoroughly carried out.

Now democracies, far from sharing this view, are inclined to take the opposite view. At Athens there was a great tribunal composed of men learned in, and competent to interpret, the law. The people could not tolerate such an institution, so laboured to destroy it and to usurp its functions. The crowd reasoned thus. "We can interpret and carry out laws, because we make them." The conclusion was right, but the minor premise was disputable. The retort can be made: "True, you can interpret and carry out laws because you make them, but perhaps you have no business to be making laws." Be that as it may, the Athenian people not only interpreted and applied its own laws, but it insisted on being paid for so doing. The result was that the poorest citizens sat judging all day long, as all others were unwilling to sacrifice their whole time for a payment of

six drachmas. This plebeian tribu [18] nal continued for many years. Its most celebrated feat was the judgment which condemned Socrates to death. This was perhaps matter for regret, but the great principle, the sovereignty of incompetence, was vindicated.

Modern democracies seem to have adopted the same principle, in form they are essentially amœbic. A democracy, well-known to us all, has been evolved in the following manner.

It began with this idea; king and people, democratic royalty, royal democracy. The people makes, the king carries out, the law; the people legislates, the king governs, retaining, however, a certain control over the law, for he can suspend the carrying out of a new law when he considers that it tends to obstruct the function of government. Here then was a sort of specialisation of functions. The same person, or collective body of persons, did not both legislate and govern.

This did not last long. The king was suppressed. Democracy remained, but a certain amount of respect for efficiency remained too. The people, the masses, did not, every single man of them, claim the right to govern and to legislate directly. [19]

It did not even claim the right to nominate the legislature directly. It adopted indirect election, *à deux degrés*, that is, it nominated electors who in turn nominated the legislature. It thus left two aristocracies above itself, the first electors and the elected legislature. This was still far removed from democracy on the Athenian model which did everything itself.

This does not mean that much attention was paid to efficiency. The electors were not chosen because they were particularly fitted to elect a legislature, nor was the legislature itself elected with any reference to its legislative capacity. Still there was a certain pretence of a desire for efficiency, a double pseudo-efficiency. The crowd, or rather the constitution, assumed that legislators elected by the delegates of the crowd were more competent to make laws than the crowd itself.

This somewhat curious form of efficiency I have called *compétence par collation*, efficiency or competence conferred by this form of selection. There is absolutely nothing to show that so-and-so has the

slightest legislative or juridical faculty, so I confer on him a certificate of efficiency by the confidence I repose in [20] him when nominating him for the office, or rather I show my confidence in the electors and they confer a certificate of efficiency on those whom they nominate for the legislature.

This, of course, is devoid of all common sense, but appearances, and even something more, are in its favour.

It is not common sense for it involves something being made out of nothing, inefficiency producing efficiency and zero extracting 'one' out of itself. This form of selection, though it does not appeal to me under any circumstances, is legitimate enough when it is exercised by a competent body. A university can confer a degree upon a distinguished man because it can judge whether his degreeless condition is due to accident or not. It would, however, be highly ridiculous and paradoxical if the general public were to confer mathematical degrees. A degree of efficiency conferred by an inefficient body is contrary to common sense.

There is, however, some plausibility and indeed a little more than plausibility in favour of this plan. Degrees in literature and in dramatic art are conferred, given by 'collation,' by incompetent people, that is by the public. [21] We can say to the public: "You know nothing of literary and dramatic art." It will retort: "True, I know nothing, but certain things move me and I confer the degree on those who evoke my emotions." In this it is not altogether wrong. In the same way the degree of doctor of political science is conferred by the people on those who stir its emotions and who express most forcibly its own passions. These doctors of political science are the empassioned representatives of its own passions.

— In other words, the worst legislators! —

Yes, very nearly so, but not quite. It is very useful that we should have an exponent of popular passion at the crest of the social wave, to tell us not indeed what the crowd is thinking, for the crowd never thinks, but what the crowd is feeling, in order that we may not cross it too violently or obey it too obsequiously. An engineer would call it the science of the strength of materials.

A medium assures me that he had a conversation with Louis XIV, who said to him: "Universal suffrage is an excellent thing in a monarchy. It is a source of information. When it recommends a certain course of action [22] it shows us that this is a thing which we must not do. If I could have consulted it over the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, it would have given me a clear mandate for that Revocation and I should have known what to do, and that Edict would not have been revoked. I acted as I did, because I was advised by ministers whom I considered experienced statesmen. Had I been aware of the state of public opinion I should have known that France was tired of wars and new palaces and extravagance. But this was not an expression of passion and prejudice, but a cry of suffering. As far as passion and prejudice are concerned we must go right in the teeth of public opinion, and universal suffrage will tell you what that is. On the other hand we must pay heed, serious heed to every cry of pain, and here too universal suffrage will come to our aid. Universal suffrage is necessary to a monarchy as a source of information."

This, I am told, is Louis XIV's present opinion on the subject.

As far as legislation therefore is concerned, the attempt to secure competence by 'collation' [23] is an absurdity. Yet it is an inverted sort of competence useful for indicating the state of a nation's temper. From this it follows that this system is as mischievous in a republic as it would be wholesome in a monarchy. It is not therefore altogether bad.

The democracy which we have in view, after having been governed by the representatives of its representatives for ten years, submitted for the next fifteen years to the rule of one representative and took no particular advantage therefrom.

Then for thirty years it adopted a scheme which aimed at a certain measure of efficiency. It assumed that the electors of the legislature ought not to be nominated, but marked out by their social position, that is their fortune. Those who possessed so many drachmas were to be electors.

What sort of a basis for efficiency is this? It is a basis but certainly a somewhat narrow one.

It is a basis, first, because a man who owns a certain fortune has a greater interest than others in a sound management of public business, and self-interest opens and quickens the [24] eye; and again a man who has money and does not lose it cannot be altogether a fool.

On the other hand it is a narrow basis, because the possession of money is of itself no guarantee of political ability, and the system leads to the very questionable proposition that every rich man is a competent social reformer. It is, however, a sort of competence, but a competence very precariously established and on a very narrow basis.

This system disappeared and our democracy, after a short interregnum, repeated its previous experiment and submitted for eighteen years to the rule of one delegate with no great cause to congratulate itself on the result.

It then adopted democracy in a form almost pure and simple. I say almost, for the democratic system pure and simple involves the direct government of the people without any intervening representatives, by means of a continuous plebiscite. Our democracy then set up and still maintains a democratic system almost pure and simple, that is to say, it established government of the nation by delegates whom it itself elected and by these delegates strictly and exclusively. This time [25] we have reached an apotheosis of incompetence that is well nigh absolute.

This, our present system, purports to be the rule of efficiency chosen by the arbitrary form of selection which has been described. Just as the bishop in the story, addressing a haunch of venison, exclaimed: "I baptise thee carp," so the people says to its representatives: "I baptise you masters of law, I baptise you statesmen, I baptise you social reformers." We shall see later on that this baptism goes very much further than this.

If the people were capable of judging of the legal and psychological knowledge possessed by those who present themselves for election, this form of selection need not be prohibitive of efficiency and might even be satisfactory; but in the first place, the electors are not capable of judging, and secondly, even if they were, nothing would be gained.

Nothing would be gained, because the people never places itself at this point of view. Emphatically never! It looks at the qualifications of the candidate not from a scientific but from a moral point of view.

— Well that surely is something, and, in a way, [26] a guarantee of efficiency. The legislators are not capable of making laws, it is true; but at least they are honest men. This guarantee of moral efficiency, some critic will say, gives me much satisfaction.

Please be careful, I reply, we should never think of giving the management of a railway station to the most honest man, but to an honest man who, besides, understood thoroughly railway administration. So we must put into our laws not only honest intentions, but just principles of law, politics, and society.

Secondly, if the candidates are considered from the point of view of their moral worth it is in a peculiar fashion. High morality is imputed to those who share the dominant passions of the people and who express themselves thereon more violently than others. Ah! these are our honest men, it cries, and I do not say that the men of its choice are dishonest, I only say that by this criterion they are not infallibly marked out even as honest.

— Still, some one replies, they are probably disinterested, for they follow popular prejudices, and not their own particular, individual wishes.

Yes, that is just what the masses believe, [27] while they forget that there is nothing easier than to simulate popular passion in order to win popular confidence and become a political personage. If disinterestedness is really so essential to the people, only those should be elected who oppose the popular will and who show thereby that they do not want to be elected. Or better still only those who do not stand for election should be elected, since not to stand is the undeniable sign of disinterestedness. But this is never done. That which should always be done is never done.

— But, some one will say, your public bodies which recruit their numbers by co-optation, Academies and learned societies, do not elect their members in this way. —