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Change or Decay?

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I think it was about 1927 that Balfour said, in effect, that the game was up, and that we were in for a general disintegration, unless men of all parties could meet and agree on certain fundamental things. He was not talking of coalition government, nor of anything mechanical. Some of you may remember the occasion of his utterance, which I have forgotten, but I believe I am correct in thinking he had in mind a solidification of ideas among men in general, about what elements of our society we considered worthy of preservation.

I am going to talk on that text today, not with reference to British or European politics, unless incidentally they come in, but with reference to Canada. In Canada we have happily escaped some of the convulsions which the world has seen since Balfour's utterance. At least we seem for the moment to have escaped them. Ultimately we cannot escape their influence. We certainly cannot escape their disastrous influences unless as Balfour warned us, we lay our heads together, take stock of the situation, conjure up our history, and ask what lines of future development we desire.

That may seem to be an impossibly large field to discuss in half an hour or so, but perhaps in that time I may be able to raise certain questions with sufficient clearness to light the way to the ultimate questions which we must all ask of ourselves.

Are there any fundamental social ideas, or are there not, on which reasonable agreement can be found in all our provinces? To argue that there are not would of course imply that we cannot have a society at all. Then what are these ideas? Let us take some of the most fundamental political concepts, which have grown up in Europe over a long period, and which we have inherited and set up here: such ideas as religious toleration, parliamentary government, a judiciary independent of government, and so on. I suppose that not one person in

a hundred would deny that religious toleration has been accepted for all time in Canada. It is not a thing that many of us reflect upon, even once in a decade. And perhaps every one in this room would say that there is no likelihood of its ever becoming a live issue in Canadian affairs. I am sure I hope so. Since 1760 religious toleration has been a part of our Canadian tradition even more than it has been a part of the tradition of England or France. We have had, as between this province and Quebec, a long and happy experience of it. And yet in some Canadian discussions of blasphemy, and in other things, there are disquieting signs. Remember that as late as the seventeenth century hundreds of thousands of men, women and children were done to death because of their religious faith, or lack of a certain religious faith; and remember too that much of Europe has in a few months' time lapsed to a much earlier century than the seventeenth. If we do believe here in Canada in complete religious toleration, and it is my unmixed conviction that at present we do, then it might be worthwhile to reaffirm our belief.

Consider again parliamentary government. I have heard Canadians say, and not lightly, that they did not believe in it. You remember that Carlyle used to scoff at it, in London, most of a century ago. I see grave difficulties in parliamentary government in this country which do not apply in Britain; and it may be also that we have been a little too slavish in attempting to sail precisely, and point to point, on the same tack. But here again I fancy there are few in this room who would say either lightly or deliberately, that they are prepared to see the institution discarded. Our whole development, even from days earlier than Confederation, has been on that line. The Province of Quebec, to which at first parliament and all its implications was a novelty, has come to prize it, and it has been a great means indeed towards the unity of our two races. Such things are to be remembered when we weigh the scandals

in our parliamentary history, or when we say that another system of government is desirable. And if another system, what sort of system? Now once more, as about religious toleration, some may think it altogether unnecessary and irrelevant to raise the question. But it seems to me that it is even more important to raise this question and to be articulate about it. Revolutions never come because any large part of society wills them. Revolutions must come, but violent and shattering revolutions come because the great mass of men have been blind and deaf at times when the social or economic centre of gravity has shifted, or when for one reason or another the shape of things refuses to accommodate itself to man-made forms. It is a political commonplace indeed that men live by the myths which they themselves have fashioned. But there must be some sort of general agreement that the particular myth in question is at least as good as any other conceivable myth. As an interesting example, one might cite the life of the American Congress from 1789 to 1933. A political philosopher could have seen its flaws from the beginning. Sixty years ago, Walter Bagehot wrote as though it were a matter of common knowledge that the American form of government was tolerated only because New Englanders could work anything, no matter how unworkable it was. It would be invidious, and certainly beside our present purpose, to go into the history of American government in the intervening six decades. But perhaps both its friends and its critics would agree that the Congressional system has persisted only because of the extraordinary conservatism of Americans, and not through any adaptability of its own. A few months since it was quietly shelved. I am not lamenting its passing. I wish to point out merely that a year ago no one anticipated such a sudden change. And yet it is an extraordinary change, and certain to be fraught with great influences on Canada. One hears it said just now that after all there is no very great change in the United States, or, if there is, that it is in line with changes in Europe. That is not true. The change in the United States is a complete revolution, nor is it in the least analogous to

the dramatic announcement of Premier Dollfuss of Austria, on September 13, last, that henceforth parliamentary government would no longer exist in Austria. Parliamentary government in Austria had been a brief experiment. It had not yet become a tradition in the little <sup>and small</sup> city-state which the Treaty of Versailles had carved out of the Kingdom of the Hapsburgs. In Austria no one had been eloquent as Lincoln had about government by the people, not perishing from the earth. Austria had merely been ordered to establish a parliament by one of Lincoln's successors.

Thus far I have been content to point no moral, nor shall I begin to do so now. But what I have said about American conservatism leads me back to my main theme, in a way, and also tempts me to point out that in Canada we are even more conservative. And not in Lord Balfour's sense. Balfour called for a political démarche, an innovation in political thinking, so that the essential things, the things precious to all Englishmen, might be conserved. We all know the things that Balfour would have wished to conserve, government by law, instead of violence, government by free debate, instead of edict. Other things too he doubtless wished to continue. But the things which I have mentioned he would have said were of far more importance than, for example, methods of taxation. Now Americans, and Canadians, too often have been conservative in another sense, conservative in a way that British conservatives from the time of Burke onward have denounced. We refuse to change until it is too late, a method which ends in conserving nothing. Reflect for a moment how often certain Americans have pointed out to their compatriots that congressional government would have to be purified and, above all, brought into line with the needs and tasks of the day. The almost universal reply, when reply was given, was that the Constitution was sacrosanct. But rarely has any reply been given to these proposals.

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For the most part they have been received with complete apathy. Our own case is so familiar to you that I need say nothing of that.

Now, I have tried to hit upon one or two things which I believe most Canadians would consider of fundamental importance to preserve. And yet I have not tried to conceal that both things I have instanced have a certain precariousness of tenure. Human institutions are always like that. But when such catastrophes have been loosed upon the world as our generation has seen, then the solidest foundations are threatened. Not by conspirators, not by plotters, abroad or at home. No, by a disintegration in themselves. Human institutions, as the very phrase suggests, are cemented together by human desires and wills and hopes and fears, and not least by a fairly general human understanding and intelligence. But when men are content decade after decade merely to idolize and do lip-service to a frame of things which their ancestors erected, and which they themselves care nothing about, nay which they even deride, saying such things as "Politics is a dirty game", then it is only a question of time how long the structure, half-idolized and half-despised, can stand. So many convulsions have happened in the past few years, and so listlessly and carelessly have we Canadians watched them or neglected them; so complacently too have we accepted so much in the empty futility of our party system, that - who can say? - it may well seem strange a few years hence that any one in 1933 should still have thought that parliamentary government in Canada could continue.

But I am not anxious to make prophecies, one way or another. I only go so far as to say that Balfour's prognostication, whether gloomy or not, was shrewd and penetrating, and has ample historical warrant. And if it applies to Britain it is not without application to ourselves.

Let us now take another step in our argument. Let us suppose that our leading men, of all parties and faiths, and provinces, could agree on such things as have been the warp and woof of our life for the last two

or three hundred years. Could it not be supposed that on the foundation of that agreement they could build perhaps a little more broadly and a little higher, by agreeing on progress which has been made in the last century: such as the equality of the sexes, state supervision of mines and factories, the abolition of slavery, and a dozen other things? Let none of these questions be shirked, let them be fully ventilated, and, when agreed upon, let them be reaffirmed clearly and articulately. Not only is a new political charter needed in these days, — not a new constitution, but a new political charter, a reaffirmed political confession of faith, if you will, — but many of its clauses will spell out to us in capital letters the clauses that are still to be written.

One of the overworked phrases that I hear, ad nauseam, these days is "Men of vision". But one does not really need to see visions nor to dream dreams nowadays to see that much must be done, and done without delay. We should all admit, should we not, that politics, governments, institutions, exist for man, and not man for institutions? Consider then the situation which exists in this country at present. This country is literally a vacant empire. One can say that without any of the exaggeration that has marked some of our immigration "literature" in the past. Just what prevents an easy subsistence in it for the few millions of people we now muster? Just what? It will not do, in times like these to deal in phrases: to talk about scarcity of money, the dislocation of trade, or any abstraction of that sort. It will not do to talk about unemployment being caused by machinery — as though it were not more important to let machinery rust than to let fellow-citizens starve. Please observe I am not now talking philanthropically, but in terms of politics: it has been a political axiom for the last 2500 years that revolutions begin with hunger. It is not sound politics for a society to allow itself to be overtaken by this sort of situation: in which, <sup>that is,</sup> two-thirds or three-quarters of the citizens find that through "improvements" in production a full day's work is

not required from the remaining citizens, and then coolly say to them: "You are not working, therefore you cannot eat". So far indeed is it from being sound politics that it is mere anarchy.

You may think that I am looking too narrowly at the Canadian situation and forgetting that Canada - which is largely concerned with foreign trade - has been caught in the general maelstrom. I am not forgetting anything of the sort. Indeed, the more intimate one's knowledge of economics, the more intimate one's experiences of the ups and downs of Canadian foreign trade, with exchanges violently fluctuating and with even more violent attempts to overtake the fluctuations by tariff regulations and other regulations, the more clearly one sees that in these matters too some of us are content to arrogate privileges, while the devil flails the unfortunate. But, however we are considered, whether in foreign trade, or in relation to one another, the fact remains that Canadians, per caput, are an extraordinarily wealthy people, wealthy not merely in accumulated possessions, but in the power and capacity to feed, clothe, house and employ our total number. Can any one contradict that? Indeed, can any one point to ten millions of people in the whole period of history who were masters of such resources as we?

Canada four years ago, to say that the first charge on the resources of this country was the decent subsistence of those living in it. It would startle few today. But I think it would be a great step forward, and have a most healing influence, if our politicians of all parties were willingly to acknowledge their acceptance of this tenet. After all we are a generation behind modern Europe in taking such a step. With ancient Mediterranean states it was a universal political axiom. Ways and means of putting the axiom into effect are the merest details, and we need not stop over them here. The important thing is to deal with fundamental things in advance, instead of neglecting them until time of crisis. And again, as a mere matter of hook-

keeping, must we not balance such accounts as these before we begin to be glib again about immigration? - to say nothing of all the political, social and even biological disturbances inherent in immigration.

Such, I believe, are the things we should find ourselves agreed upon, if following Balfour's advice, we sat down to find how far agreement was possible. Doubtless some of us would lay more stress on some things, and some on others. And many here may be surprised that I have as yet made no mention of certain things dear to themselves. I have of course purposely avoided contentious themes. We may luxuriate in contentions after we have settled and solidified agreement. Not that I should be in any great haste to seek out contentions while times are what they are. Having agreed on broad and statesmanlike foundations I half believe that we should find ourselves in a conciliatory mood, not only about political and social questions such as I have envisaged, but about some of the major economic issues as well. Economic science is in large part a matter for experts. But it has political aspects, which the majority of citizens should understand. And one thing which we should all realise is that no economic theory is good enough to push to a relentless conclusion. You will remember how Sir Robert Giffen was wont to answer when he heard that something was good economically, or bad economically? "How good?" he would enquire, and "How bad?" Our method has been different. If any one told us that transcontinental railways were good for us, we have said: "Let us have three of them". Hearing that colleges and universities were good we have supplied, or attempted to supply, nine or ten of them for a million people. Once committed to tariffs we have steadily increased the rates. In the same way we have increased our wheat acreage, slaughtered our forests, and encouraged monopolists. Nothing has been too big for us, nothing too sudden. But neither trees nor nations grow like that. And even if one viewed our economic actions in a merely economic way, one would whisper about the law of diminishing returns.



Not that anything is ever merely economic, except in the text books. Every social action, despite the doctrinaires and the Machiavellis, has its moral side.

Neither am I doctrinaire or dreamer enough to imagine that, if we followed Balfour's advice, we should find ourselves at one bound in the millenium. Even when a people is surging forward on some great wave of happy enthusiasm, as happened England in the spacious days of Elizabeth, not even then is it free from knaves who would betray it, or selfish scoundrels who would grind the bones of their fellow citizens to manure their own enterprises. These we shall have always with us. But these days are not spacious days. The lights have been going out all over the world, as Grey foresaw they would. But is it the end? For those who speak the English tongue, is it the end of parliaments, the end of law, the end of freedom? It was in days not less dark than our own that Milton sounded his trumpet. The Miltonic note is perhaps too much to hope. But is there possible what Balfour thought the barest minimum for our survival, - a common effort of citizenship?

And with that word, citizenship, I am going to close. The task today is not merely one for experts and leaders. Experts and leaders we need, and shall need, Heaven knows. But there is a task for every one of us. Any society, any civilised order, reaches its term and comes to an end, if within itself there is any large number of men who think that they themselves can lead utterly selfish, unneighbourly, unsocial lives, and yet that the world in general will go on satisfactorily, provided that once in four years or so they go to the polls to elect or defeat a government.