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The Lessons of To-Day [May, 1887]

Freedom Press (London)

May, 1887

THE LESSONS OF TO-DAY.

THE HYDE PARK DEMONSTRATION.

THERE is something cruel in the part which is assigned to the people in the present political system. Their advice is never asked on a purely and simply defined question. Even the few who are called upon to take part in an election are asked to choose a representative simply as an expression of sympathy and confidence, and if any question at all is put to them, it is so involved in personal and party wranglings that the intrinsic merit of it is quite lost sight of. The usual course, however, is to simply ignore them, and they are only called upon when the time comes for one party to deal an effective blow at another in order to turn it out of office. Then the whole machinery of party is put in motion, all energies are exerted, all resources exhausted, all strategies and devices adopted in order to bring about a great and imposing demonstration, in which the cause of a party may be identified with the cause of the people, or the cause of the people may be exploited in the interests of a party.

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Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Socialism, Vol. 1, No. 8, online
source RevoltLib.com, retrieved on April 12, 2020.

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Handbills are distributed, renowned speakers engaged, class rivalries evoked, passions inflamed, hopes kindled, popular preferences courted. Every helping band is welcomed, and then, but only then, every allowance is made for differences of opinion; the demonstrating politicians, and the demonstrative people, being for the time allies. At the same time due care is taken that the people, when they have served the purpose for which they were needed, should disperse and depart as quietly as they came, leaving the matter in the hands of the self-constituted political leaders who claim, in and out of Parliament, a right to speak and act for them. The joke is repeated until the point is carried, and the unemployed politicians, once safe in office, may utter the exulting exclamation of the dying Augustus: "Friends, the comedy has been successfully played!"

The comedy is too well known to need description in detail, but mention it we should in order to come to some conclusions of our own which appear to us to be more far-reaching and better worth thought than those with which most people content themselves.

The first conclusion to be drawn from these public performances of political parties is, that as a means to ascertain the sentiments of the people on a given question they are quite worthless. The English masses sympathized with the Irish peasantry long before the late demonstration, while it is not in the least doubtful that many members of the Liberal and Radical Associations which took part in the Hyde Park meeting were only brought over to the side of Home Rule by the watchword of their leader--himself a quite recent convert--and the perhaps more persuasive voices of ambition and self-interest.

On the contrary, and this is a second inference from the same facts, there is not in the present political system, there never will be in any political system which after having centralized the chief interests of millions of people commits them to the arbitrary will of a few, any means to test the feelings of the multitudes, or to enable them to come forward except when exercised by political priests and pontiffs.

Moreover, a popular *sentiment* or *will*, even on matters of great and undoubted general interest, is not made to form itself, as people are, by the centralization of affairs and their own economical condition (maximum of requirement with minimum of force), together with other secondary influences, kept aloof from public questions, and only called upon to consider them in a very summary manner when the time has come for them to play into the hands of political factions.

Then the only means by which their ascertained will is to be carried into effect is not by a direct appeal to their delegates, not by a request to their servants to do so and so, not even by a humble petition, but only by an indirect moral influence on the deputies, such influence being diluted in the process by the other interests and views of the said deputies, and has to come at last, if at all, to the legislature (we say nothing about the executive, or the officials on whose help the executive depends) in a very unrecognizable garb and at a very reduced expression.

Just think of this, the whole nation rendered incapable of address-to its so-called representatives any decisive opinion on any subject affecting its welfare or even its existence; this same people convened huge concocted meetings in order to procure for one of the two rival parties a few more votes at the next election. There must be something rotten in a system which makes the people a mere instrument of Party intrigues, and leaves them victorious or vanquished --- slaves still!