

The Nature of Public Opinion

In no country is public opinion so powerful as in the United States: in no country can it be so well studied. Before I proceed to describe how it works upon the government of the nation and the states, it may be proper to consider briefly how it is formed, and what is the nature of the influence which it everywhere exercises upon government.

What do we mean by public opinion? The difficulties which occur in discussing its action mostly arise from confounding opinion itself with the organs whence people try to gather it, and from using the term, sometimes to denote everybody's views, that is, the aggregate of all that is thought and said on a subject, sometimes merely the views of the majority, the particular type of thought and speech which prevails over other types.

The simplest form in which public opinion presents itself is when a sentiment spontaneously rises in the mind and flows from the lips of the average man upon his seeing or hearing something done or said. Homer presents this with his usual vivid directness in the line which frequently recurs in the *Iliad* when the effect produced by a speech or event is to be conveyed: "And thus anyone was saying as he looked at his neighbour." This phrase describes what may be called the rudimentary stage of opinion. It is the prevalent impression of the moment. It is what any man (not every man) says, i.e., it is the natural and the general thought or wish which an occurrence evokes. But before opinion begins to tell upon government, it has to go through several other stages. These stages are various in different ages and countries. Let us try to note what they are in England or America at the present time, and how each stage grows out of the other.

A businessman reads in his newspaper at breakfast the events of the preceding day. He reads that Prince Bismarck has announced a policy of protection for German industry, or that Mr. Henry George has been

nominated for the mayoralty of New York. These statements arouse in his mind sentiments of approval or disapproval, which may be strong or weak according to his previous predilection for or against protection or Mr. Henry George, and of course according to his personal interest in the matter. They rouse also an expectation of certain consequences likely to follow. Neither the sentiment nor the expectation is based on processes of conscious reasoning—our businessman has not time to reason at breakfast—they are merely impressions formed on the spur of the moment. He turns to the leading article in the newspaper, and his sentiments and expectations are confirmed or weakened according as he finds that they are or are not shared by the newspaper writer. He goes down to his office in the train, talks there to two or three acquaintances, and perceives that they agree or do not agree with his own still faint impressions. In his business office he finds his partner and a bundle of other newspapers which he glances at; their words further affect him, and thus by the end of the day his mind is beginning to settle down into a definite view, which approves or condemns Prince Bismarck's declaration or the nomination of Mr. George. Meanwhile a similar process has been going on in the minds of others, and particularly of the journalists, whose business it is to discover what people are thinking. The evening paper has collected the opinions of the morning papers, and is rather more positive in its forecast of results. Next morning the leading journals have articles still more definite and positive in approval or condemnation and in prediction of consequences to follow; and the opinion of ordinary minds, hitherto fluid and undetermined, has begun to crystallize into a solid mass. This is the second stage. Then debate and controversy begin. The men and the newspapers who approve Mr. George's nomination argue with those who do not; they find out who are friends and who opponents. The effect of controversy is to drive the partisans on either side from some of their arguments, which are shown to be weak; to confirm them in others, which they think strong; and to make them take up a definite position on one side. This is the third stage. The fourth is reached when action becomes necessary. When a citizen has to give a vote, he votes as a member of a party; his party prepossessions and party allegiance lay hold on him, and generally stifle any individual doubts or repulsions he may feel. Bringing men up to the polls is like passing a steam roller over stones newly laid on a road: the angularities are pressed down, and an appearance of smooth and even uniformity is given which did not exist before. When a man has voted, he is committed: he has thereafter an interest in backing the view which he has sought to make prevail. Moreover, opinion, which may

have been manifold till the polling, is thereafter generally twofold only. There is a view which has triumphed and a view which has been vanquished.

In examining the process by which opinion is formed, we cannot fail to note how small a part of the view which the average man entertains when he goes to vote is really of his own making. His original impression was faint and perhaps shapeless; its present definiteness and strength are mainly due to what he has heard and read. He has been told what to think, and why to think it. Arguments have been supplied to him from without, and controversy has imbedded them in his mind. Although he supposes his view to be his own, he holds it rather because his acquaintances, his newspapers, his party leaders all hold it. His acquaintances do the like. Each man believes and repeats certain phrases, because he thinks that everybody else on his own side believes them, and of what each believes only a small part is his own original impression, the far larger part being the result of the commingling and mutual action and reaction of the impressions of a multitude of individuals, in which the element of pure personal conviction, based on individual thinking, is but small.

Everyone is of course predisposed to see things in some one particular light by his previous education, habits of mind, accepted dogmas, religious or social affinities, notions of his own personal interest. No event, no speech or article, ever falls upon a perfectly virgin soil: the reader or listener is always more or less biased already. When some important event happens, which calls for the formation of a view, these preexisting habits, dogmas, affinities, help to determine the impression which each man experiences, and so far are factors in the view he forms. But they operate chiefly in determining the first impression, and they operate over many minds at once. They do not produce variety and independence; they are soon overlaid by the influences which each man derives from his fellows, from his leaders, from the press.

Orthodox democratic theory assumes that every citizen has, or ought to have, thought out for himself certain opinions, i.e., ought to have a definite view, defensible by arguments, of what the country needs, of what principles ought to be applied in governing it, of the men to whose hands the government ought to be entrusted. There are persons who talk, though certainly very few who act, as if they believed this theory, which may be compared to the theory of some ultra-Protestants that every good Christian has or ought to have, by the strength of his own reason, worked out for himself from the Bible a system of theology. But one need only try the experiment of talking to that representative of public opinion whom the

Americans call "the man in the cars," to realize how uniform opinion is among all classes of people, how little there is of that individuality in the ideas of each individual which they would have if he had formed them for himself, how little solidity and substance there is in the political or social beliefs of nineteen persons out of every twenty. These beliefs, when examined, mostly resolve themselves into two or three prejudices and aversions, two or three prepossessions for a particular leader or section of a party, two or three phrases or catchwords suggesting or embodying arguments which the man who repeats them has not analyzed. It is not that these nineteen persons are incapable of appreciating good arguments, or are unwilling to receive them. On the contrary, and this is especially true of the working classes, an audience is usually pleased when solid arguments are addressed to it, and men read with most relish the articles or leaflets, supposing them to be smartly written, which contain the most carefully sifted facts and the most exact thought. But to the great mass of mankind in all places, public questions come in the third or fourth rank among the interests of life, and obtain less than a third or a fourth of the leisure available for thinking. It is therefore rather sentiment than thought that the mass can contribute, a sentiment grounded on a few broad considerations and simple trains of reasoning; and the soundness and elevation of their sentiment will have more to do with their taking their stand on the side of justice, honour, and peace, than any reasoning they can apply to the sifting of the multifarious facts thrown before them, and to the drawing of the legitimate inferences therefrom.

It may be suggested that this analysis, if true of the uneducated, is not true of the educated classes. It is less true of that small class which in Europe specially occupies itself with politics; which, whether it reasons well or ill, does no doubt reason. But it is substantially no less applicable to the commercial and professional classes than to the working classes; for in the former, as well as in the latter, one finds few persons who take the pains, or have the leisure, or indeed possess the knowledge, to enable them to form an independent judgment. The chief difference between the so-called upper, or wealthier, and humbler strata of society is that the former are less influenced by sentiment and possibly more influenced by notions, often erroneous, of their own interest. Having something to lose, they imagine dangers to their property or their class ascendancy. Moving in a more artificial society, their sympathies are less readily excited, and they more frequently indulge the tendency to cynicism natural to those who lead a life full of unreality and conventionalisms.

The apparent paradox that where the humbler classes have differed in opinion from the higher, they have often been proved by the event to have been right and their so-called betters wrong (a fact sufficiently illustrated by the experience of many European countries during the last half-century¹), may perhaps be explained by considering that the historical and scientific data on which the solution of a difficult political problem depends are really just as little known to the wealthy as to the poor. Ordinary education, even the sort of education which is represented by a university degree, does not fit a man to handle these questions, and it sometimes fills him with a vain conceit of his own competence which closes his mind to argument and to the accumulating evidence of facts. Education ought, no doubt, to enlighten a man; but the educated classes, speaking generally, are the property-holding classes, and the possession of property does more to make a man timid than education does to make him hopeful. He is apt to underrate the power as well as the worth of sentiment; he overvalues the restraints which existing institutions impose; he has a faint appreciation of the curative power of freedom, and of the tendency which brings things right when men have been left to their own devices, and have learnt from failure how to attain success. In the less-educated man a certain simplicity and openness of mind go some way to compensate for the lack of knowledge. He is more apt to be influenced by the authority of leaders; but as, at least in England and America, he is generally shrewd enough to discern between a great man and a demagogue, this is more a gain than a loss.

While suggesting these as explanations of the paradox, I admit that it remains a paradox. But the paradox is not in the statement, but in the facts. Nearly all great political and social causes have made their way first among the middle or humbler classes. The original impulse which has set the cause in motion, the inspiring ideas that have drawn men to it, have no doubt come from lofty and piercing minds, and minds generally belonging to the cultivated class. But the principles and precepts these minds have delivered have waxed strong because the masses have received them gladly, while the wealthiest and educated classes have frowned on or persecuted them.

¹ It may be said that this has been so because the movements of the last century have been mostly movements in a democratic direction, which obtained the sympathy of the humbler classes because tending to break down the power and privilege which the upper classes previously enjoyed. This observation, however, does not meet all the cases, among which may be mentioned the attitude of the English working classes towards Italy from 1848 onwards, as well as their attitude in the American Civil War from 1861 to 1865, and in the Eastern Question from 1876 onwards, for in none of these instances had they any personal interest. I purposely take cases far back in the past.

The most striking instance of all is to be found in the early history of Christianity.

The analysis, however, which I have sought to give of opinion applies only to the nineteen men out of twenty, and not to the twentieth. It applies to what may be called passive opinion—the opinion of those who have no special interest in politics, or concern with them beyond that of voting, of those who receive or propagate, but do not originate, views on public matters. Or, to put the same thing in different words, we have been considering how public opinion grows and spreads, as it were, spontaneously and naturally. But opinion does not merely grow; it is also made. There is not merely the passive class of persons; there is the active class, who occupy themselves primarily with public affairs, who aspire to create and lead opinion. The processes which these guides follow are too well known to need description. There are, however, one or two points which must be noted, in order to appreciate the reflex action of the passive upon the active class.

The man who tries to lead public opinion, be he statesman, journalist, or lecturer, finds in himself, when he has to form a judgment upon any current event, a larger measure of individual prepossession, and of what may be called political theory and doctrine, than belongs to the average citizen. His view is therefore likely to have more individuality, as well as more intellectual value. On the other hand, he has also a stronger motive than the average citizen for keeping in agreement with his friends and his party, because if he stands aloof and advocates a view of his own, he may lose his influence and his position. He has a past, and is prevented, by the fear of seeming inconsistent, from departing from what he has previously said. He has a future, and dreads to injure it by severing himself ever so little from his party. He is accordingly driven to make the same sort of compromise between his individual tendencies and the general tendency which the average citizen makes. But he makes it more consciously, realizing far more distinctly the difference between what he would think, say, and do, if left to himself, and what he says and does as a politician, who can be useful and prosperous only as a member of a body of persons acting together and professing to think alike.

Accordingly, though the largest part of the work of forming opinion is done by these men—whom I do not call professional politicians, because in Europe many of them are not solely occupied with politics, while in America the name of professionals must be reserved for another class—we must not forget the reaction constantly exercised upon them by the passive

majority. Sometimes a leading statesman or journalist takes a line to which he finds that the mass of those who usually agree with him are not responsive. He perceives that they will not follow him, and that he must choose between isolation and a modification of his own views. A statesman may sometimes venture on the former course, and in very rare cases succeed in imposing his own will and judgment on his party. A journalist, however, is almost invariably obliged to hark back if he has inadvertently taken up a position disagreeable to his clientèle, because the proprietors of the paper have their circulation to consider. To avoid so disagreeable a choice, a statesman or a journalist is usually on the alert to sound the general opinion before he commits himself on a new issue. He tries to feel the pulse of the mass of average citizens; and as the mass, on the other hand, look to him for initiative, this is a delicate process. In European countries it is generally the view of the leaders which prevails, but it is modified by the reception which the mass give it; it becomes accentuated in the points which they appreciate; while those parts of it, or those ways of stating it, which have failed to find popular favour, fall back into the shade.

This mutual action and reaction of the makers or leaders of opinion upon the mass, and of the mass upon them, is the most curious part of the whole process by which opinion is produced. It is also that part in which there is the greatest difference between one free country and another. In some countries, the leaders count for, say, three-fourths of the product, and the mass for one-fourth only. In others we may find these proportions reversed. In some countries the mass of the voters are not only markedly inferior in education to the few who lead, but also diffident, more disposed to look up to their betters. In others the difference of intellectual level between those who busy themselves with politics and the average voter is far smaller. Perhaps the leader is not so well instructed a man as in the countries first referred to; perhaps the average voter is better instructed and more self-confident. Where both of these phenomena coincide, so that the difference of level is inconsiderable, public opinion will evidently be a different thing from what it is in countries where, though the constitution has become democratic, the habits of the nation are still aristocratic. This is the difference between America and the countries of Western Europe.

Government by Public Opinion

We talk of public opinion as a new force in the world, conspicuous only since governments began to be popular. Statesmen, even in the last generation, looked on it with some distrust or dislike. Sir Robert Peel, for instance, in a letter written in 1820, speaks with the air of a discoverer, of "that great compound of folly, weakness, prejudice, wrong feeling, right feeling, obstinacy, and newspaper paragraphs, which is called public opinion."

Yet opinion has really been the chief and ultimate power in nearly all nations at nearly all times. I do not mean merely the opinion of the class to which the rulers belong. Obviously the small oligarchy of Venice was influenced by the opinion of the Venetian nobility, as the absolute czar is influenced now by the opinion of his court and his army. I mean the opinion, unspoken, unconscious, but not the less real and potent, of the masses of the people. Governments have always rested and, special cases apart, must rest, if not on the affection, then on the reverence or awe, if not on the active approval, then on the silent acquiescence, of the numerical majority. It is only by rare exception that a monarch or an oligarchy has maintained authority against the will of the people. The despotisms of the East, although they usually began in conquest, did not stand by military force but by popular assent. So did the feudal kingdoms of mediaeval Europe. So do the despotisms of the sultan (so far, at least, as regards his Mussulman subjects), of the shah, and of the Chinese emperor. The cases to the contrary are chiefly those of military tyrannies, such as existed in many of the Greek cities of antiquity, and in some of the Italian cities of the Renaissance, and such as exist now in the so-called republics of Central and South America. That even the Roman Empire, that eldest child of war and conquest, did not rest on force but on the consent and goodwill of its subjects is shown

by the smallness of its standing armies, nearly the whole of which were employed against frontier enemies, because there was rarely any internal revolt or disturbance to be feared. Belief in authority, and the love of established order, are among the strongest forces in human nature, and therefore in politics. The first supports governments *de jure*, the latter governments *de facto*. They combine to support a government which is *de jure* as well as *de facto*. Where the subjects are displeased, their discontent may appear perhaps in the epigrams which tempered the despotism of Louis XV in France, perhaps in the sympathy given to bandits like Robin Hood, perhaps in occasional insurrections like those of Constantinople under the Eastern emperors. Of course, where there is no habit of combination to resist, discontent may remain for some time without this third means of expressing itself. But, even when the occupant of the throne is unpopular, the throne as an institution is in no danger so long as it can command the respect of the multitude and show itself equal to its duties.

In the earlier or simpler forms of political society public opinion is passive. It acquiesces in, rather than supports, the authority which exists, whatever its faults, because it knows of nothing better, because it sees no way to improvement, probably also because it is overawed by some kind of religious sanction. Human nature must have something to reverence, and the sovereign, because remote and potent and surrounded by pomp and splendour, seems to it mysterious and half divine. Worse administrations than those of Asiatic Turkey and Persia at this moment can hardly be imagined, yet the Mohammedan population show no signs of disaffection. The subjects of Darius and the subjects of Theebaw obeyed as a matter of course. They did not ask why they obeyed, for the habit of obedience was sufficient. They could, however, if disaffected, have at any moment overturned the throne, which had only, in both cases, an insignificant force of guards to protect it. During long ages the human mind did not ask itself—in many parts of the world does not even now ask itself—questions which seem to us the most obvious. Custom, as Pindar said, is king over all mortals and immortals, and custom prescribed obedience. When in any society opinion becomes self-conscious, when it begins to realize its force and question the rights of its rulers, that society is already progressing, and soon finds means of organizing resistance and compelling reform.

The difference, therefore, between despotically governed and free countries does not consist in the fact that the latter are ruled by opinion and the former by force, for both are generally ruled by opinion. It consists rather in this, that in the former the people instinctively obey a power which they do not

know to be really of their own creation, and to stand by their own permission; whereas in the latter the people feel their supremacy, and consciously treat their rulers as their agents, while the rulers obey a power which they admit to have made and to be able to unmake them—the popular will. In both cases force is seldom necessary, or is needed only against small groups, because the habit of obedience replaces it. Conflicts and revolutions belong to the intermediate stage, when the people are awakening to the sense that they are truly the supreme power in the state, but when the rulers have not yet become aware that their authority is merely delegated. When superstition and the habit of submission have vanished from the whilom subjects, when the rulers, recognizing that they are no more than agents for the citizens, have in turn formed the habit of obedience, public opinion has become the active and controlling director of a business in which it was before the sleeping and generally forgotten partner. But even when this stage has been reached, as has now happened in most civilized states, there are differences in the degree and mode in and by which public opinion asserts itself. In some countries the habit of obeying rulers and officials is so strong that the people, once they have chosen the legislature or executive head by whom the officials are appointed, allow these officials almost as wide a range of authority as in the old days of despotism. Such people have a profound respect for government as government, and a reluctance, due either to theory or to mere laziness, perhaps to both, to interfere with its action. They say, "That is a matter for the administration; we have nothing to do with it;" and stand as much aside or submit as humbly as if the government did not spring from their own will. Perhaps they practically leave themselves, as did the Germans of Bismarck's day, in the hands of a venerated monarch and a forceful minister, giving these rulers a free hand so long as their policy moves in accord with the general sentiment of the nation, and maintains its glory. Perhaps while frequently changing their ministries, they nevertheless yield to each ministry, and to its executive subordinates all over the country, an authority great while it lasts, and largely controlling the action of the individual citizen. This seems to be still true of France. There are other countries in which, though the sphere of government is strictly limited by law, and the private citizen is little inclined to bow before an official, the habit has been to check the ministry chiefly through the legislature, and to review the conduct of both ministry and legislature only at long intervals, when an election of the legislature takes place. This has been, and to some extent is still, the case in Britain. Although the people rule, they rule not directly, but through the House of Commons, which they choose only once

in four or five years, and which may, at any given moment, represent rather the past than the present will of the nation.

I make these observations for the sake of indicating another form which the rule of the people may assume. We have distinguished three stages in the evolution of opinion from its unconscious and passive into its conscious and active condition. In the first it acquiesces in the will of the ruler whom it has been accustomed to obey. In the second conflicts arise between the ruling person or class, backed by those who are still disposed to obedience, on the one hand, and the more independent or progressive spirits on the other; and these conflicts are decided by arms. In the third stage the whilom ruler has submitted, and disputes are referred to the sovereign multitude, whose will is expressed at certain intervals upon slips of paper deposited in boxes, and is carried out by the minister or legislature to whom the popular mandate is entrusted. A fourth stage would be reached, if the will of the majority of the citizens were to become ascertainable at all times, and without the need of its passing through a body of representatives, possibly even without the need of voting machinery at all. In such a state of things the sway of public opinion would have become more complete, because more continuous, than it is in those European countries which, like France, Italy, and Britain, look chiefly to parliaments as exponents of national sentiment. The authority would seem to remain all the while in the mass of the citizens. Popular government would have been pushed so far as almost to dispense with, or at any rate to anticipate, the legal modes in which the majority speaks its will at the polling booths; and this informal but direct control of the multitude would dwarf, if it did not supersede, the importance of those formal but occasional deliverances made at the elections of representatives. To such a condition of things the phrase, "rule of public opinion," might be most properly applied, for public opinion would not only reign but govern.

The mechanical difficulties, as one may call them, of working such a method of government are obvious. How is the will of the majority to be ascertained except by counting votes? How, without the greatest inconvenience, can votes be frequently taken on all the chief questions that arise? No country has yet surmounted these inconveniences, though little Switzerland with its referendum and initiative has faced and partially dealt with some of them, and some of the American states are treading in the same path. But what I desire to point out is that even where the machinery for weighing or measuring the popular will from week to week or month to month has not been, and is not likely to be, invented, there may nevertheless

be a disposition on the part of the rulers, whether ministers or legislators, to act as if it existed; that is to say, to look incessantly for manifestations of current popular opinion, and to shape their course in accordance with their reading of those manifestations. Such a disposition will be accompanied by a constant oversight of public affairs by the mass of the citizens, and by a sense on their part that they are the true governors, and that their agents, executive and legislative, are rather servants than agents. Where this is the attitude of the people on the one hand and of the persons who do the actual work of governing on the other, it may fairly be said that there exists a kind of government materially, if not formally, different from the representative system as it presented itself to European thinkers and statesmen of the last generation. And it is to this kind of government that democratic nations seem to be tending.

The state of things here noted will find illustration in what I have to say in the following chapters regarding opinion in the United States. Meanwhile a few remarks may be hazarded on the rule of public opinion in general.

The excellence of popular government lies not so much in its wisdom—for it is as apt to err as other kinds of government—as in its strength. It has been compared, ever since Sir William Temple, to a pyramid, the firmest based of all buildings. Nobody can be blamed for obeying it. There is no appeal from its decisions. Once the principle that the will of the majority, honestly ascertained, must prevail, has soaked into the mind and formed the habits of a nation, that nation acquires not only stability, but immense effective force. It has no need to fear discussion and agitation. It can bend all its resources to the accomplishment of its collective ends. The friction that exists in countries where the laws or institutions handed down from former generations are incompatible with the feelings and wishes of the people has disappeared. A key has been found that will unlock every door.

On the other hand, such a government is exposed to two dangers. One, the smaller one, yet sometimes troublesome, is the difficulty of ascertaining the will of the majority. I do not mean the difficulty of getting all citizens to vote, because it must be taken that those who do not vote leave their will in the hands of those who do, but the difficulty of obtaining by any machinery yet devised a quite honest record of the results of voting. Where the issues are weighty, involving immense interests of individual men or groups of men, the danger of bribery, of force, and still more of fraud in taking and counting votes, is a serious one. When there is reason to think that ballots have been tampered with, the value of the system is gone; and men are remitted to the old methods of settling their differences.

The other danger is that minorities may not sufficiently assert themselves. Where a majority has erred, the only remedy against the prolongation or repetition of its error is in the continued protests and agitation of the minority, an agitation which ought to be conducted peaceably, by voice and pen, but which must be vehement enough to rouse the people and deliver them from the consequences of their blunders. But the more complete the sway of majorities is, so much the less disposed is a minority to maintain the contest. It loses faith in its cause and in itself, and allows its voice to be silenced by the triumphant cries of its opponents. How are men to acquiesce promptly and loyally in the decision of a majority, and yet to go on arguing against it? How can they be at once submissive and aggressive? That conceit of his own goodness and greatness which intoxicates an absolute monarch besets a sovereign people also, and the slavishness with which his ministers approach an Oriental despot may reappear in the politicians of a Western democracy. The duty, therefore, of a patriotic statesman in a country where public opinion rules, would seem to be rather to resist and correct than to encourage the dominant sentiment. He will not be content with trying to form and mould and lead it, but he will confront it, lecture it, remind it that it is fallible, rouse it out of its self-complacency. Unfortunately, courage and independence are plants which a soil impregnated with the belief in the wisdom of numbers does not tend to produce; nor is there any art known to statesmen whereby their growth can be fostered.

Experience has, however, suggested plans for lessening the risks incident to the dominance of one particular set of opinions. One plan is for the people themselves to limit their powers, i.e., to surround their own action and the action of their agents with restrictions of time and method which compel delay. Another is for them so to parcel out functions among many agents that no single one chosen indiscreetly, or obeying his mandate overzealously, can do much mischief, and that out of the multiplicity of agents differences of view may spring which will catch the attention of the citizens.

The temper and character of a people may supply more valuable safeguards. The country which has worked out for itself a truly free government must have done so in virtue of the vigorous individuality of its children. Such an individuality does not soon yield even to the pressure of democratic conditions. In a nation with a keen moral sense and a capacity for strong emotions, opinion based on a love of what is deemed just or good will resist the multitude when bent on evil; and if there be a great variety of social conditions, of modes of life, of religious beliefs, these will prove centres

of resistance to a dominant tendency, like rocks standing up in a river, at which he whom the current sweeps downwards may clutch. Instances might be cited even from countries where the majority has had every source of strength at its command—physical force, tradition, the all but universal persuasions and prejudices of the lower as well as of the higher classes—in which small minorities have triumphed, first by startling and then by leavening and convincing the majority. This they have done in virtue of that intensity of belief which is oftenest found in a small sect or group, not because it is small, but because if its belief were not intense it would not venture to hold out at all against the adverse mass. The energy of each individual in the minority makes it in the long run a match for a majority huger but less instinct with vitality. In a free country more especially, ten men who care are worth a hundred who do not.

Such natural compensations as this occur in the physical as well as in the spiritual and moral world, and preserve both. But they are compensations on which the practical statesman cannot safely rely, for they are partial, they are uncertain, and they probably tend to diminish with the progress of democracy. The longer public opinion has ruled, the more absolute is the authority of the majority likely to become, the less likely are energetic minorities to arise, the more are politicians likely to occupy themselves, not in forming opinion, but in discovering and hastening to obey it.

How Public Opinion Rules in America

It was observed in last chapter that the phrase "government by public opinion" is most specifically applicable to a system wherein the will of the people acts directly and constantly upon its executive and legislative agents. A government may be both free and good without being subject to this continuous and immediate control. Still this is the goal toward which the extension of the suffrage, the more rapid diffusion of news, and the practice of self-government itself, necessarily lead free nations; and it may even be said that one of their chief problems is to devise means whereby the national will shall be most fully expressed, most quickly known, most unresistingly and cheerfully obeyed. Delays and jerks are avoided, friction and consequent waste of force are prevented, when the nation itself watches all the play of the machinery and guides its workmen by a glance. Towards this goal the Americans have marched with steady steps, unconsciously as well as consciously. No other people now stands so near it.

Of all the experiments which America has made, this is that which best deserves study, for her solution of the problem differs from all previous solutions, and she has shown more boldness in trusting public opinion, in recognizing and giving effect to it, than has yet been shown elsewhere. Towering over presidents and state governors, over Congress and state legislatures, over conventions and the vast machinery of party, public opinion stands out, in the United States, as the great source of power, the master of servants who tremble before it.

For the sake of making clear what follows, I will venture to recapitulate what was said in an earlier chapter as to the three forms which government has taken in free countries. First came primary assemblies, such as those of the Greek republics of antiquity, or those of the early Teutonic tribes, which have survived in a few Swiss cantons. The whole people met, debated

current questions, decided them by its votes, chose those who were to carry out its will. Such a system of direct popular government is possible only in small communities, and in this day of large states has become a matter rather of antiquarian curiosity than of practical moment.

In the second form, power belongs to representative bodies, parliaments and chambers. The people in their various local areas elect men, supposed to be their wisest or most influential, to deliberate for them, resolve for them, choose their executive servants for them. They give these representatives a tolerably free hand, leaving them in power for a considerable space of time, and allowing them to act unchecked, except in so far as custom, or possibly some fundamental law, limits their discretion. This is done in the faith that the chamber will feel its responsibility and act for the best interests of the country, carrying out what it believes to be the wishes of the majority, unless it should be convinced that in some particular point it knows better than the majority what the interests of the country require. Such a system has long prevailed in England, and the English model has been widely imitated on the continent of Europe and in the British colonies.

The third is something between the other two. It may be regarded either as an attempt to apply the principle of primary assemblies to large countries, or as a modification of the representative system in the direction of direct popular sovereignty. There is still a legislature, but it is elected for so short a time and checked in so many ways that much of its power and dignity has departed. Ultimate authority is not with it, but with the people, who have fixed limits beyond which it cannot go, and who use it merely as a piece of machinery for carrying out their wishes and settling points of detail for them. The supremacy of their will is expressed in the existence of a constitution placed above the legislature, although capable of alteration by a direct popular vote. The position of the representatives has been altered. They are conceived of, not as wise and strong men chosen to govern, but as delegates under specific orders to be renewed at short intervals.

This is the form established in the United States. Congress sits for two years only. It is strictly limited by the Constitution, and by the coexistence of the state governments, which the Constitution protects. It has (except by way of impeachment) no control over the federal executive, which is directly named by and responsible to the people. So, too, the state legislatures sit for short periods, do not appoint the state executives, are hedged in by the prohibitions of the state constitutions. The people frequently legislate directly by enacting or altering a constitution. The principle of popular sovereignty could hardly be expressed more unmistakably. Allowing for the differences to which the vast size of the country gives rise, the mass of the citizens

may be deemed as directly the supreme power in the United States as the Assembly was at Athens or Syracuse.¹ The only check on the mass is that which they have themselves imposed, and which the ancient democracies did not possess, the difficulty of changing a rigid constitution. And this difficulty is serious only as regards the federal Constitution.

As this is the most developed form of popular government, so is it also the form which most naturally produces what I have called government by public opinion. Popular government may be said to exist wherever all power is lodged in and issues from the people. Government by public opinion exists where the wishes and views of the people prevail, even before they have been conveyed through the regular law-appointed organs, and without the need of their being so conveyed. As in a limited monarchy the king, however powerful, must act through certain officers and in a defined legal way, whereas in a despotism he may act just as he pleases, and his initial written on a scrap of paper is as sure of obedience as his full name signed to a parchment authenticated by the Great Seal or the countersignature of a minister, so where the power of the people is absolute, legislators and administrators are quick to catch its wishes in whatever way they may be indicated, and do not care to wait for the methods which the law prescribes. This happens in America. Opinion rules more fully, more directly, than under the second of the systems described above.

A consideration of the nature of the state governments as of the national government will show that legal theory as well as popular self-confidence gives birth to this rule of opinion. Supreme power resides in the whole mass of citizens. They have prescribed, in the strict terms of a legal document, the form of government. They alone have the right to change it, and that only in a particular way. They have committed only a part of their sovereignty to their executive and legislative agents, reserving the rest to themselves. Hence their will, or in other words, public opinion, is constantly felt by these agents to be, legally as well as practically, the controlling authority. In England, Parliament is the nation, not merely by a legal fiction, but because the nation looks to Parliament only, having neither reserved any authority to itself nor bestowed any elsewhere. In America, Congress is not the nation, and does not claim to be so.

The ordinary functions and business of government, the making of laws, the imposing of taxes, the interpretation of laws and their execution, the administration of justice, the conduct of foreign relations, are parcelled out

¹ Rome is a somewhat peculiar case, because she left far more power to her nonrepresentative Senate and to her magistrates than the Greek democracies did to their councils or officials. See Chap 25 in Vol I

among a number of bodies and persons whose powers are so carefully balanced and touch at so many points that there is a constant risk of conflicts, even of deadlocks. Some of the difficulties thence arising are dealt with by the courts, as questions of the interpretation of the Constitution. But in many cases the intervention of the courts, which can act only in a suit between parties, comes too late to deal with the matter, which may be an urgent one; and in some cases there is nothing for the courts to decide, because each of the conflicting powers is within its legal right. The Senate, for instance, may refuse the measures which the House thinks necessary. The president may veto bills passed by both houses, and the houses may not have a two-thirds majority to pass them over his veto. Congress may urge the president to adopt a certain course of action, and the president may refuse. The president may propose a treaty to the Senate and the Senate may reject it. In such cases there is a stoppage of governmental action which may involve loss to the country. The master, however, is at hand to settle the quarrels of his servants. If the question be a grave one, and the mind of the country clear upon it, public opinion throws its weight into one or other scale, and its weight is decisive. Should opinion be nearly balanced, it is no doubt difficult to ascertain, till the next election arrives, which of many discordant cries is really the prevailing voice. This difficulty must, in a large country, where frequent plebiscites are impossible, be endured; and it may be well, when the preponderance of opinion is not great, that serious decisions should not be quickly taken. The general truth remains that a system of government by checks and balances specially needs the presence of an arbiter to incline the scale in favour of one or other of the balanced authorities, and that public opinion must therefore be more frequently invoked and more constantly active in America than in other countries.

Those who invented this machinery of checks and balances were anxious not so much to develop public opinion as to resist and build up breakwaters against it. No men were less revolutionary in spirit than the heroes of the American Revolution. They had made a revolution in the name of *Magna Charta* and the Bill of Rights: they were penetrated by a sense of the dangers incident to democracy. They conceived of popular opinion as aggressive, revolutionary, unreasoning, passionate, futile, and a breeder of mob violence. We shall presently inquire whether this conception has been verified. Meantime be it noted that the efforts made in 1787 to divide authority and, so to speak, force the current of the popular will into many small channels instead of permitting it to rush down one broad bed, have really tended to exalt public opinion above the regular legally appointed organs of government. Each of these organs is too small to form opinion, too narrow to

express it, too weak to give effect to it. It grows up not in Congress, not in state legislatures, not in those great conventions which frame platforms and choose candidates, but at large among the people. It is expressed in voices everywhere. It rules as a pervading and impalpable power, like the ether which, as physicists say, passes through all things. It binds all the parts of the complicated system together and gives them whatever unity of aim and action they possess.

There is also another reason why the opinion of the whole nation is a more important factor in the government of the United States than anywhere in Europe. In Europe there has always been a governing class, a set of persons whom birth, or wealth, or education has raised above their fellows, and to whom has been left the making of public opinion together with the conduct of administration and the occupancy of places in the legislature. The public opinion of Germany, Italy, France, and England has been substantially the opinion of the class which wears black coats and lives in good houses, though in the two latter countries it has begun of late years to be affected by the opinion of the classes socially lower. Although the members of the British Parliament now obey the mass of their constituents when the latter express a distinct wish, still the influence which plays most steadily on them and permeates them is the opinion of a class or classes and not of the whole nation. The class to which the great majority of members of both houses belong (i.e., the landowners and the persons occupied in professions and in the higher walks of commerce) is the class which chiefly forms and expresses what is called public opinion. Even in these days of vigilant and exacting constituencies one sees many members of the House of Commons the democratic robustness or provincial crudity of whose ideas melts like wax under the influence of fashionable dinner parties and club smoking rooms. It is a common complaint that it is hard for a member to "keep touch" with the opinion of the masses.

In the United States public opinion is the opinion of the whole nation, with little distinction of social classes. The politicians, including the members of Congress and of state legislatures, are, perhaps not (as Americans sometimes insinuate) below, yet certainly not above the average level of their constituents. They find no difficulty in keeping touch with outside opinion. Washington or Albany may corrupt them, but not in the way of modifying their political ideas. They do not aspire to the function of forming opinion. They are like the Eastern slave who says "I hear and obey." Nor is there any one class or set of men, or any one "social layer," which more than another originates ideas and builds up political doctrine for the mass. The opinion of the nation is the resultant of the views, not of a number of

classes, but of a multitude of individuals, diverse, no doubt, from one another, but, for the purposes of politics far less diverse than if they were members of groups defined by social rank or by property.

The consequences are noteworthy. Statesmen cannot, as in Europe, declare any sentiment which they find telling on their friends or their opponents in politics to be confined to the rich, or to the governing class, and to be opposed to the general sentiment of the people. In America you cannot appeal from the classes to the masses. What the employer thinks, his workmen think.² What the wholesale merchant feels, the retail storekeeper feels, and the poorer customers feel. Divisions of opinion are vertical and not horizontal. Obviously this makes opinion more easily ascertained, while increasing its force as a governing power, and gives the people, that is to say, all classes in the community, a clearer and stronger consciousness of being the rulers of their country than European peoples have. Every man knows that he is himself a part of the government, bound by duty as well as by self-interest to devote part of his time and thoughts to it. He may neglect this duty, but he admits it to be a duty. So the system of party organizations already described is built upon this theory; and as this system is more recent, and is the work of practical politicians, it is even better evidence of the general acceptance of the doctrine than are the provisions of constitutions. Compare European countries, or compare the other states of the New World. In the so-called republics of Central and South America a small section of the inhabitants pursue politics, while the rest follow their ordinary avocations, indifferent to elections and pronunciamientos and revolutions. In Germany, and in the German and Slavonic parts of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, people think of the government as a great machine which will go on, whether they put their hand to it or not, a few persons working it, and all the rest paying and looking on. The same thing is largely true of republican France, and of semi-republican Italy, where free government is still a novelty, and local self-government in its infancy. Even in England, though the eighty years that have passed over her since the great Reform Act have brought many new ideas with them, the ordinary voter is still far from feeling, as the American does, that the government is his own, and he individually responsible for its conduct.

² Of course I do not include questions specially relating to labour, in which there may be a direct conflict of interests. Nor is it to be denied that the wealthiest men, especially financiers, have become more of a class, holding views of their own on questions affecting capital, than they were some decades ago.

Organs of Public Opinion

How does this vague, fluctuating, complex thing we call public opinion—omnipotent yet indeterminate, a sovereign to whose voice everyone listens, yet whose words, because he speaks with as many tongues as the waves of a boisterous sea, it is so hard to catch—how does public opinion express itself in America? By what organs is it declared, and how, since these organs often contradict one another, can it be discovered which of them speak most truly for the mass? The more completely popular sovereignty prevails in a country, so much the more important is it that the organs of opinion should be adequate to its expression, prompt, full, and unmistakable in their utterances. And in such European countries as England and France, it is now felt that the most successful party leader is he who can best divine from these organs what the decision of the people will be when a direct appeal is made to them at an election.

I have already observed that in America public opinion is a power not satisfied with choosing executive and legislative agents at certain intervals, but continuously watching and guiding those agents, who look to it, not merely for a vote of approval when the next general election arrives, but also for directions which they are eager to obey, so soon as they have learnt their meaning. The efficiency of the organs of opinion is therefore more essential to the government of the United States than even to England or to France.

An organ of public opinion is, however, not merely the expression of views and tendencies already in existence, but a factor in further developing and moulding the judgment of the people. Opinion makes opinion. Men follow in the path which they see others treading; they hasten to adopt the view that seems likely to prevail. Hence every weighty voice, be it that of a speaker, or an association, or a public meeting, or a newspaper, is at once

the disclosure of an existing force and a further force influencing others. This fact, while it multiplies the organs through which opinion is expressed, increases the difficulty of using them aright, because every voice seeks to represent itself as that of the greater, or at least of a growing number.

The press, and particularly the newspaper press, stands by common consent first among the organs of opinion. Yet few things are harder than to estimate its power, and state precisely in what that power consists.

Newspapers are powerful in three ways—as narrators, as advocates, and as weathercocks. They report events, they advance arguments, they indicate by their attitude what those who conduct them and are interested in their circulation take to be the prevailing opinion of their readers. In the first of these regards the American press is the most active in the world. Nothing escapes it which can attract any class of readers. It does not even confine itself to events that have happened, but is apt to describe others which may possibly have happened, however slight the evidence for them: *pariter facta atque infecta canebat*. This habit affects its worth as an historic record and its influence with sober-minded people. Statesmen may be heard to complain that once an untrue story has been set flying they cannot efface the effect however complete the contradiction they may give it; and injustice is thus frequently done. Sometimes, of course, there is deliberate misrepresentation. But more often the erroneous statements are the natural result of the high pressure under which the newspaper business is carried on. The appetite for news, and for highly spiced or “sensational” news, is enormous, and journalists working under keen competition and in unceasing haste are disposed to take their chance of the correctness of the information they receive.

Much harm there is, but sometimes good also. It is related of an old barrister that he observed: “When I was young I lost a good many causes which I ought to have won, and now, that I have grown old and experienced, I win a good many causes which I ought to lose. So, on the whole, justice has been done.” If in its heedlessness the press often causes pain to the innocent, it does a great and necessary service in exposing evildoers, many of whom would escape were it never to speak except upon sufficient evidence. It is a watchdog whose noisy bark must be tolerated, even when the person who approaches has no bad intent. No doubt charges are so promiscuously and often so lightly made as to tell less than they would in a country where the law of libel was more frequently appealed to. But many abuses are unveiled, many more prevented by the fear of publicity.

Although the leading American newspapers contain far more nonpolitical

matter than those of Europe, they also contain, especially of course before any important election, more domestic political intelligence than any, except perhaps two or three, of the chief English journals. Much of it is inaccurate, but partisanship distorts it no more than in Europe, perhaps less. The public has the benefit of hearing everything it can wish, and perhaps more than it ought to wish, to know about every occurrence and every personality. The intelligence is not quite of the same kind as in England or France. There are fewer reports of speeches, because fewer speeches of an argumentative nature are made, but more of the schemes and doings of conventions and political cliques, as well as of the sayings of individuals.

As the advocates of political doctrines, newspapers are of course powerful, because they are universally read and often ably written. They are accused of unfairness and vituperation, but I doubt if there is any marked difference in this respect between their behaviour and that of European papers at a time of excitement. Nor could I discover that their arguments were any more frequently than in Europe addressed to prejudices rather than to reason; indeed they are less markedly party organs than are those of Britain. In America, however, a leading article carries less weight of itself, being discounted by the shrewd reader as the sort of thing which the paper must of course be expected to say, and is effective only when it takes hold of some fact (real or supposed), and hammers it into the public mind. This is what the unclean politician has to fear. Mere abuse he does not care for, but constant references to and comments on misdeeds of which he cannot clear himself tell in the long run against him.

The influence attributed to the press is evidenced not only by the posts (especially foreign legations) frequently bestowed upon the owners or editors of leading journals, but by the current appeals made to good party men to take in only stanch party papers, and by the threats to "read out" of the party journals which show a dangerous independence. Nevertheless, if the party press be estimated as a factor in the formation of opinion, whether by argument or by authority, it must be deemed less powerful in America than in Europe, because its average public is shrewder, more independent, less readily impressed by the mysterious "we." I doubt if there be any paper by which any considerable number of people swear; and am sure that comparatively few quote their favourite journal as an oracle in the way many persons still do in England. The vast area of the republic and the absence of a capital prevent any one paper from winning its way to predominance, even in any particular section of the country. Herein one notes a remarkable contrast to the phenomena of the Old World. Although the chief American newspapers

are, regarded as commercial properties, "bigger things" than those of Europe, they do not dominate the whole press as a few journals do in most European countries. Or, to put the same thing differently, in England, and much the same may be said of France and Germany, some twenty newspapers cover nine-tenths of the reading public, whereas in America any given twenty papers would not cover one-third.

In those cities, moreover, where one finds really strong papers, each is exposed to a severer competition than in Europe, for in cities most people look at more than one newspaper. The late Mr. Horace Greeley, who for many years owned and edited the *New York Tribune*, is probably the only case of an editor who, by his journalistic talent and great self-confidence, acquired such a personal influence over multitudes of readers as to make them watch for and follow his deliverances. He was to the later Whig party and the earlier Republican party much what Katkoff was to the National party in Russia between 1870 and 1880, and had, of course, a far greater host of readers.

It is chiefly in its third capacity, as an index and mirror of public opinion, that the press is looked to. This is the function it chiefly aims at discharging; and public men feel that in showing deference to it they are propitiating, and inviting the commands of, public opinion itself. In worshipping the deity you learn to conciliate the priest. But as every possible view and tendency finds expression through some organ in the press, the problem is to discover which views have got popular strength behind them. Professed party journals are of little use, though one may sometimes discover from the way they advance an argument whether they think it will really tell on the opposite party, or use it only because it falls within their own programme. More may therefore be gleaned from the independent or semi-independent journals, whereof there are three classes: papers which, like two or three in the great cities, generally support one party, but are apt to fly off from it when they disapprove its conduct, or think the people will do so; papers which devote themselves mainly to news, though they may give editorial aid to one or other party according to the particular issue involved; and papers not professedly, or primarily political. Of this last class the most important members are the religious weeklies, to whose number and influence few parallels can be discovered in Europe. They are mostly either neutral or somewhat loosely attached to their party, usually the Republican party, because it began as the Free Soil party, and includes, in the North, the greater number of serious-minded people. It is only on great occasions, such as a presidential election, or when some moral issue arises, that they discuss

current politics at length. When they do, great is their power, because they are deemed to be less "thirled" to a party or a leader, because they speak from a moral standpoint, and because they are read on Sunday, a time of leisure, when their seed is more likely to take root. The other weekly and monthly magazines used to deal less with politics than did the three leading English monthlies, but some of them are now largely occupied with political or politico-social topics, their influence seems to grow with the increasing amount of vigorous writing they contain.

During presidential contests much importance is attributed to the attitude of the leading papers of the great cities, for the revolt of anyone from its party—as, for instance, the revolt of several Republican papers during the election of 1884 and that of many Democratic papers in 1896—indicates discontent and danger. Where a schism exists in a state party, the bosses of one or other section will sometimes try to capture and manipulate the smaller country papers so as to convey the impression that their faction is gaining ground. Newspapers take more notice of one another, both by quoting from friendly sheets and by attacking hostile ones, than is usual in England, so that any incident or witticism which can tell in a campaign is at once taken up and read in a day or two in every city from Detroit to New Orleans.

The Americans have invented an organ for catching, measuring, and indicating opinion, almost unknown in Europe, in their practice of citing the private deliverances of prominent men. Sometimes this is done by publishing a letter, addressed not to the newspaper but to a friend, who gives it the publicity for which it was designed. Sometimes it is announced how the prominent man is going to vote at the next election. One may often notice short paragraphs stating that Judge So-and-So, or Dr. Blank, an eminent clergyman, is going to "bolt" the presidential or state ticket of his party; and perhaps the reasons assigned for his conduct follow. Of the same nature, but more elaborate, is the interview, in which the prominent man unbosoms himself to a reporter, giving his view of the political position in a manner less formal and obtrusive but not less effective than that of a letter to the editor. Sometimes, at the editor's suggestion, or of his own motion, a brisk reporter waits on the leading citizen and invites the expression of his views, which is rarely refused, though, of course, it may be given in a guarded and unsatisfying way. Sometimes the leading citizen himself, when he has a fact on which to comment, or views to communicate, sends for the reporter, who is only too glad to attend. The plan has many conveniences, among which is the possibility of disavowing any particular phrase as one which has failed to convey the speaker's true meaning. All these devices

serve to help the men of eminence to impress their ideas on the public, while they show that there is a part of the public which desires such guidance.

Taking the American press all in all, it seems to serve the expression, and subserve the formation, of public opinion more fully than does the press of any part of the European continent, and not less fully than that of England. Individual newspapers and those who write in them may enjoy less power than is the case in some countries of the Old World; but if this be so, the cause is to be found in the fact that the journals lay themselves out to give news rather than views, that they are less generally bound to a particular party, and that readers are, except at critical moments, less warmly interested in politics than are educated Englishmen, because other topics claim a relatively larger part of their attention. The American press may not be above the moral level of the average good citizen—in no country does one either expect or find it to be so—but it is above the level of the machine politicians in the cities. In the war waged against these worthies the bolder and stronger newspapers have on occasion given powerful aid to the cause of reform by dragging corruption to light.

While believing that a complete picture of current opinion can be more easily gathered from American than from English journals, I do not mean to imply that they supply all a politician needs. Anyone who has made it his business to feel the pulse of his own must be sensible that when he has been travelling abroad for a few weeks, he is sure, no matter how diligently he peruses the leading home papers of all shades, to “lose touch” of the current sentiment of the country in its actuality. The journals seem to convey to him what their writers wish to be believed, and not necessarily what the people are really thinking; and he feels more and more as weeks pass the need of an hour’s talk with four or five discerning friends of different types of thought, from whom he will gather how current facts strike and move the minds of his countrymen. Every prudent man keeps a circle of such friends, by whom he can test and correct his own impressions better than by the almost official utterances of the party journals. So in America there is much to be learnt from conversation with judicious observers outside politics and typical representatives of political sections and social classes, which the most diligent study of the press will not give, not to add that it occasionally happens that the press of a particular city may fall, for a time, under potent local influences which prevent it from saying all that ought to be said.

Except during electoral campaigns, public meetings play a smaller part

in the political life of the United States than in that of Western Europe. Meetings were, of course, more frequent during the struggle against slavery than they need be in these quieter times, yet the difference between European and American practice cannot be wholly due to the more stirring questions which have latterly roused Europeans. A meeting in America is usually held for some practical object, such as the selection of candidates or the creation of an organization, less often as a mere demonstration of opinion and means of instruction. When instruction is desired, the habit is to bring down a man of note to give a political lecture, paying him from \$75 to \$100, or perhaps even \$150, nor is it thought unbecoming for senators and ex-senators to accept such fees. The meetings during an election campaign, which are numerous enough, do not always provide argumentative speaking, for those who attend are assumed to be all members of one party, sound already, and needing nothing but an extra dose of enthusiasm; but since first the protective tariff and thereafter silver and the currency became leading issues, the proportion of reasoning to declamation has increased. Members of Congress do not deliver such annual discourses to their constituents as it has become the fashion for members of the House of Commons to deliver in England; and have indeed altogether an easier time of it as regards speaking, though a far harder one as regards the getting of places for their constituents. American visitors to England seem surprised and even a little edified when they find how much meetings are made to do there in the way of eliciting and cultivating opinion among the electors. I have often heard them praise the English custom, and express the wish that it prevailed in their own country.

As the ceaseless desire of every public man is to know which way the people are going, and as the polls are the only sure index of opinion, every election, however small, is watched with close attention. Now elections are in the United States as plentiful as revolutions in Peru. The vote cast for each party in a city, or state legislature district, or congressional district, or state, at the last previous election, is compared with that now cast, and inferences drawn as to what will happen at the next state or presidential election. Special interest attaches to the state pollings that immediately precede a presidential election, for they not only indicate the momentary temper of the particular voters but tell upon the country generally, affecting that large number who wish to be on the winning side. As happens in the similar case of what are called "by-elections" to the House of Commons in England, too much weight is generally attributed to these contests, which are sometimes, though less frequently than in England, decided by purely

local causes. Such elections, however, give the people opportunities of expressing their displeasure at any recent misconduct chargeable to a party, and sometimes lead the party managers to repent in time and change their course before the graver struggle arrives.

Associations are created, extended, and worked in the United States more quickly and effectively than in any other country. In nothing does the executive talent of the people better shine than in the promptitude wherewith the idea of an organization for a common object is taken up, in the instinctive discipline that makes everyone who joins in starting it fall into his place, in the practical, businesslike turn which the discussions forthwith take. Thus in 1884, the cattlemen of the farther West, finding difficulties in driving their herds from Texas to Wyoming and Montana, suddenly convoked a great convention in Chicago which presented a plan for the establishment of a broad route from South to North, and resolved on the steps proper for obtaining the necessary legislation. Here, however, we are concerned with associations only as organs for focussing and propagating opinion. The greater ones, such as the temperance and total abstinence societies, ramify over the country and constitute a species of political organization which figures in state and even in presidential contests. Nearly every "cause," philanthropic, economic, or social, has something of the kind. Local associations or committees are often formed in cities to combat the machine politicians in the interests of municipal reform; while every important election calls into being a number of "campaign clubs," which work while the struggle lasts, and are then dissolved. For these money is soon forthcoming; it is more plentiful than in Europe, and subscribed more readily for political purposes.

Such associations have great importance in the development of opinion, for they rouse attention, excite discussion, formulate principles, submit plans, embolden and stimulate their members, produce that impression of a spreading movement which goes so far towards success with a sympathetic and sensitive people. *Possunt quia posse videntur* is doubly true in America as regards the spectators as well as the actors, because the appearance of strength gathers recruits as well as puts heart into the original combatants. Unexpected support gathers to every rising cause. If it be true that individuality is too weak in the country, strong and self-reliant statesmen or publicists too few, so much the greater is the value of this habit of forming associations, for it creates new centres of force and motion, and nourishes young causes and unpopular doctrines into self-confident aggressiveness. But in any case they are useful as indications of the

tendencies at work and the forces behind these tendencies. By watching the attendance at the meetings, the language held, the amount of zeal displayed, a careful observer can discover what ideas are getting hold of the popular mind.

One significant difference between the formation and expression of opinion in the United States and in Europe remains to be noted. In England and Wales over half of the population was in 1911 to be found in sixty cities with a population exceeding 50,000. In France opinion is mainly produced in, and policy, except upon a few of the broadest issues, dictated by, the urban population, though its number falls much below that of the rural. In America the cities with a population exceeding 50,000 inhabitants were in 1910 one hundred and nine with an aggregate population of about 24,500,000, little more than 25 percent of the total population. The number of persons to the square mile was in 1911 618 in England and Wales, and was in the continental United States (1910), 30.9. Hence those influences formative of opinion which city life produces, the presence of political leaders, the influence they personally diffuse, the striking out and testing of ideas in conversation, may tell somewhat less on the American than on the English people, crowded together in their little island, and would tell much less but for the stronger social instincts of the Americans and the more general habit of reading daily newspapers.

In endeavouring to gather the tendencies of popular opinion, the task of an American statesman is in some respects easier than that of his English compeer. As social distinctions count for less in America, the same tendencies are more generally and uniformly diffused through all classes, and it is not necessary to discount so many special points of difference which may affect the result. As social intercourse is easier, and there is less *gêne* between a person in the higher and one in the humbler ranks, a man can better pick up in conversation the sentiments of his poorer neighbours. Moreover, the number of persons who belong to neither party, or on whom party allegiance sits loosely, is relatively smaller than in England, so the unpredictable vote—the doubtful element which includes those called in England “armchair politicians”—does not so much disturb calculations. Nevertheless, the task of discerning changes and predicting consequences is always a difficult one, in which the most skilful observers may err. Public opinion does not tell quite so quickly or quite so directly upon legislative bodies as in England, not that legislators do not wish to know it, but that the interposition of the machine acts to some extent as a sort of nonconductor. The din of voices is incessant, the parties are in many places nearly balanced. There are

frequent small changes from which it would be rash to infer any real movement of opinion, even as he who comes down to the beach must watch many wavelets break in ripples on the sand before he can tell whether the tide be ebbing or flowing.

It may be asked how, if the organs of public opinion give so often an uncertain sound, public opinion can with truth be said not only to reign but to govern. The answer is that a sovereign is not the less a sovereign because his commands are sometimes misheard or misreported. In America everyone listens for them. Those who manage the affairs of the country obey to the best of their hearing. They do not, as has been heretofore the case in Europe, act on their own view, and ask the people to ratify: they take the course which they believe the people at the moment desire. Leaders do not, as sometimes still happens in England, seek to force or anticipate opinion; or if they do, they suffer for the blunder by provoking a reaction. The people must not be hurried. A statesman is not expected to move ahead of them; he must rather seem to follow, though if he has the courage to tell the people that they are wrong, and refuse to be the instrument of their errors, he will be all the more respected. Those who fail because they mistake eddies and cross currents for the main stream of opinion, fail more often from some personal bias, or from vanity, or from hearkening to a clique of adherents, than from want of materials for observation. A man who can disengage himself from preconceptions, who is in genuine sympathy with his countrymen, and possesses the art of knowing where to look for typical manifestations of their sentiments, will find the organs through which opinion finds expression more adequate as well as more abundant in America than they are in any other country.

The Action of Public Opinion

The last few chapters have attempted to explain what are the conditions under which opinion is formed in America, what national qualities it reflects, how it is affected by class interests or local circumstances, as well as through what organs it manifests itself. We must now inquire how it acts, and for this purpose try to answer three questions.

By whom is public opinion formed? i.e., by the few or by the many?

How does it seek to grasp and use the legal machinery which the constitutions (federal and state) provide?

What means has it of influencing the conduct of affairs otherwise than through the regular legal machinery?

It may serve to illustrate the phenomena which mark the growth of opinion in America if we compare them with those of some European country. As Britain is the country in which public opinion has been longest and with least interruption installed in power, and in which the mass of the people are more largely than elsewhere interested in public affairs,¹ Britain supplies the fittest materials for a comparison.

In Britain political supremacy belongs to the householder voters, who number (over the whole United Kingdom) about 7,500,000, being rather less than two-thirds of the adult male population. Public opinion ought in theory to reside in them. Practically, however, as everybody knows, most of them have little that can be called political opinion. It is the creation and possession of a much smaller number.

An analysis of public opinion in Britain will distinguish three sets of persons—I do not call them classes, for they do not coincide with social

¹ Always excepting Switzerland, Norway, and Greece, whose conditions are, however, too dissimilar from those of America to make a comparison profitable

grades—those who make opinion, those who receive and hold opinion, those who have no opinions at all.

The first set consists of practical politicians (i.e., a certain number of members of the Lower House and a smaller fraction of members of the Upper, together with men taking an active part in local party organizations), journalists and other public writers, and a small fringe of other persons, chiefly professional men, who think and talk constantly about public affairs. Within this set of men, who are to be counted by hundreds rather than by thousands, it is the chiefs of the great parties who have the main share in starting opinion, the journalists in propagating it. Debates in Parliament do something, and the speeches which custom, recent, but strong and increasing, requires the leaders to deliver up and down the country, and which are of course reported, replace Parliament when it is not sitting. The function of the dozen best thinkers and talkers in each party is now not merely, as in the last generation, to know and manage Parliament, to watch foreign affairs, and prepare schemes of domestic legislation, but to inspire, instruct, stimulate, and attach the outside public. So too members of the houses of Parliament find that the chief utility of their position lies in its enabling them to understand the actualities of politics better than they could otherwise do, and to gain a hearing outside for what they may have to say to their fellow countrymen. This small set of persons constitutes what may be called the working staff of the laboratory; it is among them, by the reciprocal action and reaction on one another of the chiefs, the followers, and the press, that opinion receives its first shape.²

The second set of persons consists of those who watch public affairs with a certain measure of interest. When an important question arises, they look at the debates in Parliament or some platform deliverance by a leader, and they have at all times a notion of what is passing in the political world. They now and then attend a public meeting. They are not universally, but

² Small as it may still seem to an American, the class that forms public opinion has been steadily widening in England. Last century it consisted only of the then ruling class—the great families—the houses of Parliament, a certain number of lawyers, with a very few journalists and clergymen, and a sort of fringe of educated men and monied men brought into relations with the rulers. This was the England which allowed George III to alienate and lose the North American colonies. Even then, no doubt, the mass of voters outside (extremely small when compared with the numbers of today) counted for something, for there was always a possibility of their interfering when some feeling spread among them, one or other of the parties being ready to stimulate and use such a feeling, and a general election enabling it to find expression in the counties and in a few of the boroughs. When the Reform Bill of 1832 enlarged the suffrage, and almost extinguished the pocket boroughs, what had been the ruling class sank into being merely the officeholding class; and now, though it died hard, its monopoly of office is departing as its monopoly of sitting in Parliament did in 1832.

now pretty largely, enrolled as members of some political association. When an election arrives they go to vote of their own accord. They talk over politics after dinner or coming into town by a suburban train. The proportion of such persons is larger in the professional classes (and especially among the lawyers) than in the mercantile, larger in the upper mercantile than among the working men of the towns, larger among skilled than unskilled artisans, larger in the North than in the South, larger among the town workmen than among the newly enfranchised agricultural labourers. It varies in different parts of the country, and is perhaps relatively smaller in London than in other cities. If still less than a third of the total number of voters, it is nevertheless an increasing proportion.³

The third set includes all the rest of the voters. Though they possess political power, and are better pleased to have it, they do not really care about it—that is to say, politics occupy no appreciable space in their thoughts and interests. Some of them vote at elections because they consider themselves to belong to a party, or fancy that on a given occasion they have more to expect from the one party than from the other; or because they are brought up on election day by someone who can influence them. The number who vote tends to increase with the importation of party into municipal and other local contests; and from the same cause some now enrol themselves in party associations. Others will not take the trouble to go to the polls. No one, except on the stump, can attribute independent political thinking to this mass of persons, because their knowledge and interest, though growing under the influence of the privileges they enjoy, are still slight. Many have not even political prepossessions, and will stare or smile when asked to which party they belong. They count for little except at elections, and then chiefly as instruments to be used by others. So far as the formation or exercise of opinion goes, they may be left out of sight.⁴

It is obviously impossible to draw a sharp line between the second set

³ In Chapter 57 *ante*, I have attempted to distinguish an inner and outer circle of persons who take an active part in political work. What I here call the first or opinion-making set would lie almost wholly within the inner circle, and would be much smaller than that circle

⁴ What is said here cannot of course be proved, but will commend itself to anyone who, knowing a large constituency, compares the number of persons who attend public meetings at an election and can be trusted to come of themselves to the polls with the total number of voters on the lists. In the London constituencies I doubt if more than 10 per cent of the nominal voting strength show their interest in either of these ways. From 25 to 35 per cent do not even vote. The voting proportion is much larger in the northern and west Midland towns and in Scotland. In the old days of small constituencies, when it might have been supposed that the restriction of the franchise would have made it more prized, inexperienced candidates were always struck by the small percentage, out of those whom they personally canvassed, who seemed to care about politics, or even deemed themselves steady party men

and the third, or to estimate their relative numbers, because when politics are dull many persons subside into indifference whom the advent of a crisis may again arouse. And of course there are plenty of people in the second set who though interested in politics, have no sort of real knowledge or judgment about them. Such considerations, however, do not touch the point of the present analysis, which is to distinguish between the citizens who originate opinion (the first set), those who hold and somewhat modify it (the second set), and those who are rather to be deemed, and then only when they come to the poll, mere ballot markers. The first set do the thinking; they scatter forth the ideas and arguments. The second set receive and test what is set before them. What their feeling or judgment approves they accept and give effect to by their votes; what they dislike or suspect is refused and falls dead, or possibly sets them the other way. The measure of the worth of a view or proposal—I do not mean its intrinsic worth, but its power of pleasing the nation—is however not merely the breadth of the support it obtains, but also the zeal which it inspires in those who adopt it. Although persons in the second set usually belong to one or other party,⁵ and are therefore *prima facie* disposed to accept whatever comes from their party leaders, yet the degree of cordiality with which they accept indicates to a leader how their minds are moving, and becomes an element in his future calculations. Thus the second set, although rather receptive than creative, has an important function in moulding opinion, and giving it the shape and colour it finally takes when it has crystallized under the influence of a party struggle. The third set can scarcely be called a factor in the formation of opinion, except in so far as one particular proposal or cry may sometimes prove more attractive to it than another. It has some few fixed ideas or prejudices which a statesman must bear in mind, but in the main it is passive, consisting of persons who either follow the lead of members of the first or second set, or who are so indifferent as to refuse to move at all.

The United States present different phenomena. There what I have called the first set is extremely small. The third set is relatively smaller than in Britain, and but for the recent immigrants and the Negroes would be insignificant. It is in the second set that opinion is formed as well as tested, created as well as moulded. Political light and heat do not radiate out from

⁵ The increasingly party character of municipal contests tends to draw an always larger number of persons from the third class into the second, because being dragged up to vote at a municipal election they acquire, if not opinions, at least the habit of party action and of repeating party cries.

a centre as in England. They are diffused all through the atmosphere, and are little more intense in the inner sphere of practical politicians than elsewhere. The ordinary citizens are interested in politics, and watch them with intelligence, the same kind of intelligence (though a smaller quantity of it) as they apply to their own business. They are forced by incessant elections to take a more active part in public affairs than is taken by any European people. They think their own competence equal to that of their representatives and officebearers; and they are not far wrong. They do not therefore look up to their statesmen for guidance, but look around to one another, carrying to its extreme the principle that in the multitude of counsellors there is wisdom.

In America, therefore, opinion is not made but grows. Of course it must begin somewhere; but it is often hard to say where or how. As there are in the country a vast number of minds similar in their knowledge, beliefs, and attitude, with few exceptionally powerful minds applying themselves to politics, it is natural that the same idea should often occur to several or many persons at the same time, that each event as it occurs should produce the same impression and evoke the same comments over a wide area. When everybody desires to agree with the majority, and values such accord more highly than the credit of originality, this tendency is all the stronger. An idea once launched, or a view on some current question propounded, flies everywhere on the wings of a press eager for novelties. Publicity is the easiest thing in the world to obtain; but as it is attainable by all notions, phrases, and projects, wise and foolish alike, the struggle for existence—that is to say, for public attention—is severe.

I do not, of course, deny that here, as everywhere else in the world, some one person or group must make a beginning, but seek to point out that, whereas in Europe it is patent who does make the beginning, in America a view often seems to arise spontaneously, and to be the work of many rather than of few. The individual counts for less, the mass counts for more. In propagating a doctrine not hitherto advocated by any party the methods used are similar to those of England. A central society is formed, branch societies spring up over the country, a journal (perhaps several journals) is started, and if the movement thrives, an annual convention of its supporters is held, at which speeches are made and resolutions adopted. If any striking personality is connected with the movement as a leader, as Garrison was with Abolitionism, he cannot but become a sort of figurehead. Yet it happens more rarely in America than in England that an individual leader gives its character to a movement, partly because new movements

less often begin among, or are taken up by, persons already known as practical politicians.

As regards opinion on the main questions of the hour, such as the extension of slavery long was, and questions affecting railways, trusts, the currency, the tariff, are now, it rises and falls, much as in any other country, under the influence of events which seem to make for one or other of the contending views. There is this difference between America and Europe, that in the former speeches seem to influence the average citizen less, because he is more apt to do his own thinking; newspaper invective less, because he is used to it; current events rather more, because he is better informed of them. Party spirit is probably no stronger in America than in England, so far as a man's thinking and talking go, but it tells more upon him when he comes to vote.

An illustration of what has been said may be found in the fact that the proportion of persons who actually vote at an election to those whose names appear on the voting list is larger in America than in Europe. In some English constituencies this percentage is from 60 to 70 per cent, though at exciting moments it is larger than this, taking the country as a whole. At the general election of 1910 it exceeded 80 per cent. In America 80 per cent may be a fair average, taking presidential elections, which call out the heaviest vote, and in some recent contests this proportion was exceeded. Something may be ascribed to the more elaborate local organization of American parties; but against this ought to be set the fact that the English voting mass includes not quite two-thirds, the American nearly the whole, of the adult male population, and that the English voters are the more solid and well-to-do part of the population.

Is there, then, in the United States, no inner sphere of thinkers, writers, and speakers, corresponding to what we have called the "first set" in England?

There are individual men corresponding to individuals in that English set, and probably quite as numerous. There are journalists of great ability, there are a few literary men, clergymen and teachers, a good many lawyers, some businessmen, some few politicians. But they are isolated and unorganized, and do not constitute a class. Most of them are primarily occupied with their own avocations, and have only spare time to give to political thinking or writing. They are nearly all resident in or near the Eastern and four or five of the largest Western cities, and through many large tracts of country scarce any are to be found. In England the profession of opinion-making and leading is the work of specialists; in America, except as regards the

few journalists and statesmen aforesaid, of amateurs. As the books of amateurs have merits which those of professional book writers are apt to want, so something is gained by the absence of the professional element from American political opinion. But that which these amateurs produce is less coherent, less abundant, and less promptly effective upon the mass of the citizens than the corresponding English product. In fact, the individual Americans whom we are considering can (except the journalists and statesmen aforesaid) be distinguished from the mass of citizens only by their superior intellectual competence and their keener interest in public affairs. (Of the "professional politicians" there is no question, because it is in the getting and keeping of places that these gentlemen are occupied.) We may therefore repeat the proposition, that in America opinion does not originate in a particular class, but grows up in the nation at large, though, of course, there are leading minds in the nation who have more to do with its formation than the run of their fellow citizens. A good instance of the power such men may exercise is afforded by the success of the civil service reform movement, which began among a few enlightened citizens in the Eastern states, who by degrees leavened, or were thought to be leavening, the minds of their fellows to such an extent that the politicians were forced, sorely against the grain, to bring in and pass the appropriate legislation. Other instances may be found in the swift success obtained by those who advocated the secret or "Australian" ballot, a measure not specially desired by the "politicians," and in the spread of the recent legislation establishing statutory primaries, which was advocated in the West by a comparatively small number of reformers and then found support from a large body of citizens who had come to dislike the machine and its ways.

An illustration of a different kind, but not less striking, was the victory of the agitation for international copyright. A few literary men, seconded after a while by a very few publishers, had for weary years maintained what seemed a hopeless struggle for the extension to foreign authors of the right to acquire copyright in America, theretofore reserved to citizens only. These men were at first ridiculed. People asked how they could expect that the nation, whose chief reading was in European books, sold very cheap because the author received no profit, would raise the price of these books against itself? Neither Republicans nor Democrats had anything to gain by passing the bill, and Congress, by large majorities, rejected or refused to advance (which came to the same thing) every bill presented to it. The agitators, however, persevered, receiving help from a sympathetic press, and so worked upon the honour and good sense of the people that Congress at last

came round. The hostile interests fought hard, and extorted some concessions. But in 1891 the bill was passed.⁶

We may now ask in what manner opinion, formed or forming, is able to influence the conduct of affairs?

The legal machinery through which the people are by the constitution (federal and state) invited to govern is that of elections. Occasionally, when the question of altering a state constitution comes up, the citizen votes directly for or against a proposition put to him in the form of a constitutional amendment; but otherwise it is only by voting for a man as candidate that he can (except of course in the states which have adopted the initiative and referendum) give expression to his views, and directly support or oppose some policy. Now, in every country, voting for a man is an inadequate way of expressing one's views of policy, because the candidate is sure to differ in one or more questions from many of those who belong to the party. It is especially inadequate in the United States, because the strictness of party discipline leaves little freedom of individual thought or action to the member of a legislature, because the ordinary politician has little interest in anything but the regular party programme, and because in no party are the citizens at large permitted to select their candidate, seeing that he is found for them and forced on them by the professionals of the party organization. While, therefore, nothing is easier than for opinion which runs in the direct channel of party to give effect to itself frequently and vigorously, nothing is harder than for opinion which wanders out of that channel to find a legal and regular means of bringing itself to bear upon those who govern either as legislators or executive officers. This is the weak point of the American party system, perhaps of every party system, from the point of view of the independent-minded citizen, as it is the strong point from that of the party manager. A body of unorganized opinion is therefore helpless in the face of compact parties. It is obliged to organize. When organized for the promotion of a particular view or proposition it has in the United States three courses open to it.

The first is to capture one or other of the great standing parties, i.e., to persuade or frighten that party into adopting this view as part of its programme, or, to use the technical term, making it a plank of the platform, in which case the party candidates will be bound to support it. This is the most effective course, but the most difficult; for a party is sure to have

⁶ "Never despair of America!" was the exclamation of an eminent literary man (the late Mr. R. W. Gilder), who had been one of the most active promoters of the measure.

something to lose as well as to gain by embracing a new dogma. Why should such parties as those of America have lately been troubling themselves with taking up new questions, unless they are satisfied they will gain thereby? Their old dogmas are indeed worn threadbare, but have been hitherto found sufficient to cover them.

The second course is for the men who hold the particular view to declare themselves a new party, put forward their own programme, run their own candidates. Besides being costly and troublesome, this course would be thought ridiculous where the view or proposition is not one of first-rate importance, which has already obtained wide support. Where however it is applicable, it is worth taking, even when the candidates cannot be carried, for it serves as an advertisement, and it alarms the old party, from which it withdraws voting strength in the persons of the dissidents.

The third is to cast the voting weight of the organized promoters of the doctrine or view in question into the scale of whichever party shows the greatest friendliness, or seems most open to conversion. As in many states the regular parties are pretty equally balanced, even a comparatively weak body of opinion may decide the result. Such a body does not necessarily forward its own view, for the candidates whom its vote carries are nowise pledged to its programme.⁷ But it has made itself felt, shown itself a power to be reckoned with, improved its chances of capturing one or other of the regular parties, or of running candidates of its own on some future occasion. When this transfer of the solid vote of a body of agitators is the result of a bargain with the old party which gets the vote, it is called "selling out"; and in such cases it sometimes happens that the bargain secures one or two offices for the incoming allies in consideration of the strength they have brought. But if the new group be honestly thinking of its doctrines and not of the offices, the terms it will ask will be the nomination of good candidates, or a more friendly attitude towards the new view.

These are the ways in which either the minority of a party, holding some doctrine outside the regular party programme, or a new group aspiring to be a party, may assert itself at elections. The third is applicable wherever the discipline of the section which has arisen within a party is so good that

⁷ The practice of interrogating candidates with a view to obtain pledges from them to vote in a particular sense is less used in America than in England. The rigour of party discipline, and the fact that business is divided between the federal and the state legislatures may have something to do with this difference. However, American candidates are sometimes pressed during election meetings by questions and demands from groups advocating moral reforms, such as liquor prohibition.

its members can be trusted to break away from their former affiliation, and vote solid for the side their leaders have agreed to favour. It is a potent weapon, and liable to be abused. But in a country where the tide runs against minorities and small groups it is most necessary. The possibility of its employment acts as a check on the regular parties, disposing them to abstain from legislation which might irritate any body of growing opinion and tend to crystallize it as a new organization, and making them more tolerant of minor divergences from the dogmas of the orthodox programme than their fierce love of party uniformity would otherwise permit.

So far we have been considering the case of persons advocating some specific opinion or scheme. As respects the ordinary conduct of business by officials and legislators, the fear of popular displeasure to manifest itself at the next elections is, or course, the most powerful of restraining influences. Under a system of balanced authorities, such fear helps to prevent or remove deadlocks as well as the abuse of power by any one authority. A president (or state governor) who has vetoed bills passed by Congress (or his state legislature) is emboldened to go on doing so when he finds public opinion on his side; and Congress (or the state legislature) will hesitate, though the requisite majority may be forthcoming, to pass these bills over the veto. A majority in the House of Representatives, or in a state legislative body, which has abused the power of closing debate by the "previous question" rule, may be frightened by expressions of popular disapproval from repeating the offence. When the two branches of a legislature differ, and a valuable bill has failed, or when there has been vexatious filibustering, public opinion fixes the blame on the party primarily responsible for the loss of good measures or public time, and may punish it at the next election. Thus, in many ways and on many occasions, though not so often or so fully as is needed, the vision of the polls, seen some months or even years off, has power to terrify and warn selfish politicians. As the worth of courts of law is to be estimated not merely by the offences they punish and the causes they try, but even more by the offences from which the fear of penalties deters bad men, and by the payments which the prospect of a writ extracts from reluctant debtors, so a healthy and watchful public opinion makes itself felt in preventing foolish or corrupt legislation and executive jobbery. Mischief is checked in America more frequently than anywhere else by the fear of exposure, or by newspaper criticisms on the first stage of a bad scheme. And, of course, the frequency of elections—in most respects a disadvantage to the country—has the merit of bringing the prospect of punishment nearer.

It will be asked how the fear is brought home, seeing that the result of a coming election must usually be uncertain. Sometimes it is not brought home. The erring majority in a legislature may believe they have the people with them, or the governor may think his jobs will be forgotten. Generally, however, there are indications of the probable set of opinion in the language held by moderate men and the less partisan newspapers. When some of the organs of the party which is in fault begin to blame it, danger is in the air, for the other party is sure to use the opening thus given to it. And hence, of course, the control of criticism is most effective where parties are nearly balanced. Opinion seems to tell with special force when the question is between a legislative body passing bills or ordinances, and a president, or governor, or mayor, vetoing them, the legislature recoiling whenever they think the magistrate has got the people behind him. Even small fluctuations in a vote produce a great impression on the minds of politicians.

The constancy or mutability of electoral bodies is a difficult phenomenon to explain, especially where secret voting prevails, and a dangerous one to generalize on. The tendency of the electoral vote in any constituency to shift from Tory to Whig or Whig to Tory, used in England to be deemed to indicate the presence of a corrupt element. It was a black mark against a borough. In America it sometimes deserves the same interpretation, for there are corruptible masses in not a few districts. But there are also cases in which it points to the existence of an exceptionally thoughtful and unprejudiced element in the population, an element which rejects party dictation, and seeks to cast its vote for the best man. The average American voter is more likely to consider himself attached to a party than the English, and is, I think, less capricious, and therefore if a transfer of votes from one party to the other does not arise from some corrupt influence, it betokens serious disapproval on the part of the bolters. In the United States fluctuations are most frequent in some of the less sober and steady Western states, and in some of the most enlightened, such as New York and Massachusetts. In the former the people may be carried away by a sudden impulse; in the latter there is a section which judges candidates more by personal merits than by party professions.

These defects which may be noted in the constitutional mechanism for enabling public opinion to rule promptly and smoothly, are, in a measure, covered by the expertness of Americans in using all kinds of voluntary and private agencies for the diffusion and expression of opinion. Where the object is to promote some particular cause, associations are formed and federated to one another, funds are collected, the press is set to work,

lectures are delivered. When the law can profitably be invoked (which is often the case in a country governed by constitutions standing above the legislature), counsel are retained and suits instituted, all with the celerity and skill which long practice in such work has given. If the cause has a moral bearing, efforts are made to enlist the religious or semireligious magazines, and the ministers of religion.⁸ Deputations proceed to Washington or to the state capital, and lay siege to individual legislators. Sometimes a distinct set of women's societies is created, whose action on and through women is all the more powerful because the deference shown to the so-called weaker sex enables them to do what would be resented in men. Once in Iowa, when a temperance ticket was being run at the elections, parties of ladies gathered in front of the polling booths and sang hymns all day while the citizens voted. Everyone remembers what was called the "Women's Whisky War" when, in several Western states, bands of women entered the drinking saloons and, by entreaties and reproaches, drove out the customers. In no country has any sentiment which touches a number of persons so many ways of making itself felt; though, to be sure, when the first and chief effort of every group is to convince the world that it is strong, and growing daily stronger, great is the difficulty of determining whether those who are vocal are really numerous or only noisy.

For the promotion of party opinion on the leading questions that divide or occupy parties, there exist, of course, the regular party organizations, whose complex and widely ramified mechanism has been described in an earlier chapter. Opinion is, however, the thing with which this mechanism is at present least occupied. Its main objects are the selection of the party candidates and the conduct of the canvass at elections. Traces of the other purpose remain in the practice of adopting, at state and national conventions, a platform, or declaration of principles and views, which is the electoral manifesto of the party, embodying the tenets which it is supposed to live for. A convention is a body fitted neither by its numbers nor its composition for the discussion and sifting of political doctrines; but, even if it were so fitted, that is not the work to which its masters would set it. A "platform" is invariably prepared by a small committee, and usually adopted by the general committee, and by the convention, with little change. Its tendency is neither to define nor to convince, but rather to attract and to confuse. It is a mixture of denunciation, declamation, and conciliation. It reprobates

⁸ In Philadelphia, during a struggle against the city boss, the clergy were requested to preach election sermons.

the opposite party for their past misdeeds, and "views with alarm" their present policy. It repeats the tale of the services which the party of those who issue it has rendered in the past, is replete with sounding democratic generalities, and attempts so to expand and expound the traditional party tenets as to make these include all sound doctrines, and deserve the support of all good citizens. Seldom in recent years have either platforms or the process that produces them had a powerful influence on the maturing and clarification of political opinion. However, in such times as that which immediately preceded the Civil War, and again in the silver struggle of 1896, conventions have recorded the acceptance of certain vital propositions, and rejection of certain dangerous proposals, by one or other of the great parties, and they may again have to do so, not to add that an imprudent platform may lay a party open to damaging attacks. When any important election comes off, the party organization sends its speakers out on stumping tours, and distributes a flood of campaign literature. At other times opinion moves in a different plane from that of party machinery, and is scarcely affected by it.

One might expect that in the United States the thoughts of the people would be more equably and uniformly employed on politics than in European countries. The contrary is the case. Opinion, no doubt, is always alive and vigilant, always in process of formation, growth, and decay. But its activity is less continuous and sustained than in Europe, because there is a greater difference between the spring tide of a presidential campaign year and the neap tides of the three off years than there is between one year and another under the European system of chambers which may be dissolved and ministries which may be upset at any moment. Excitement at one time is succeeded by exhaustion at another. America suffers from a sort of intermittent fever—what one may call a quintan ague. Every fourth year there come terrible shakings, passing into the hot fit of the presidential election; then follows what physicians call "the interval"; then again the fit. In Europe the persons who move in what I have called the inner sphere of politics, give unbroken attention to political problems, always discussing them both among themselves and before the people. As the corresponding persons in America are not organized into a class, and to some extent not engaged in practical politics, the work of discussion has been left to be done, in the three "off years," by the journalists and a few of the more active and thoughtful statesmen, with casual aid from such private citizens as may be interested. Now many problems require uninterrupted and what may be called scientific or professional study. Foreign policy obviously

presents such problems. The shortcomings of modern England in the conduct of foreign affairs have been not unreasonably attributed to the fact that, while the attention of her statesmen is constantly distracted from them by domestic struggles, her people have not been accustomed to turn their eyes abroad except when some exciting event, such as the Egyptian troubles of 1882-85 or the Bulgarian massacre of 1876, forces them to do so. Hence a state like Germany, where a strong throne keeps a strong minister permanently in power for a long period, obtains advantages which must be credited not wholly to the wisdom of the statesmen but also to the difficulties under which their rivals in more democratic countries labour. America has had few occasions for giving her attention to foreign affairs, but some of her domestic problems are such as to demand that careful observation and unbroken reflection which neither her executive magistrates, nor her legislatures, nor any leading class among her people now give.

Those who know the United States and have been struck by the quantity of what is called politics there, may think that this description underrates the volume and energy of public political discussion. I admit the endless hubbub, the constant elections in one district or another, the paragraphs in the newspapers as to the movements or intentions of this or that prominent man, the reports of what is doing in Congress and in the state legislatures, the decisions of the federal courts in constitutional questions, the rumours about new combinations, the revelations of ring intrigues, the criticisms on appointments. It is nevertheless true that in proportion to the number of words spoken, articles printed, telegrams sent, and acts performed, less than is needed is done to form serious political thought, and bring practical problems towards a solution. I once travelled through Transylvania with Mr. Leslie Stephen in a peasant's wagon, a rude, long, low structure filled with hay. The roads were rough and stony, the horses jangled their bells, the driver shouted to the horses and cracked his whip, the wheels clanked, the boards rattled, we were deafened and shaken and jolted. We fancied ourselves moving rapidly so long as we looked straight in front, but a glance at the trees on the roadside showed that the speed was about three miles an hour. So the pother and din of American politics keep the people awake, and give them a sense of stir and motion, but the machine of government carries them slowly onward. Fortunately they have no need to hurry. It is not so much by or through the machinery of government as by their own practical good sense, which at last finds a solution the politicians may have failed to find, that the American people advance. When a European visitor dines with a company of the best citizens in such a city as Chicago or

Boston, Cleveland or Baltimore, he is struck by the acuteness, the insight, the fairness with which the condition and requirements of the country are discussed, the freedom from such passion or class feeling as usually clouds equally able Europeans, the substantial agreement between members of both the great parties as to the reforms that are wanted, the patriotism which is so proud of the real greatness of the Union as frankly to acknowledge its defects, the generous appreciation of all that is best in the character or political methods of other nations. One feels what a reserve fund of wisdom and strength the country has in such men, who so far from being aristocrats or recluses, are usually the persons whom their native fellow townsmen best know and most respect as prominent in business and in the professions. In ordinary times the practical concern of such men with either national or local politics is no greater, possibly less, than that of the leaders of business in an English town towards its municipal affairs. But when there comes an uprising against the bosses, it is these men who are called upon to put themselves at the head of it; or when a question like that of civil service reform has been before the nation for some time, it is their opinion which strikes the keynote for that of their city or district, and which shames or alarms the professional politicians. Men of the same type, though individually less conspicuous than those whom I take as examples, are to be found in many of the smaller towns, especially in the Eastern and Middle states, and as time goes on their influence grows. Much of the value of this most educated and reflective class in America consists in their being no longer blindly attached to their party, because more alive to the principles for which parties ought to exist. They may be numerically a small minority of the voters, but as in many states the two regular parties command a nearly equal normal voting strength, a small section detached from either party can turn an election by throwing its vote for the candidate, to whichever party he belongs, whom it thinks capable and honest. Thus a comparatively independent group wields a power in elections altogether disproportionate to its numbers, and by a sort of side wind can not only make its hostility feared, but secure a wider currency for its opinions. What opinion chiefly needs in America in order to control the politicians is not so much men of leisure, for men of leisure may be dilettantes and may lack a grip of realities, but a more sustained activity on the part of the men of vigorously independent minds, a more sedulous effort on their part to impress their views upon the masses, and a disposition on the part of the ordinary well-meaning but often inattentive citizens to prefer the realities of good administration to outworn party cries.

Wherein Public Opinion Fails

Without anticipating the criticism of democratic government to be given in a later chapter, we may wind up the examination of public opinion by considering what are its merits as a governing and overseeing power, and, on the other hand, what defects, due either to inherent weakness or to the want of appropriate machinery, prevent it from attaining the ideal which the Americans have set before themselves. I begin with the defects.

The obvious weakness of government by opinion is the difficulty of ascertaining it. English administrators in India lament the impossibility of learning the sentiments of the natives, because in the East the populations, the true masses, are dumb. The press is written by a handful of persons who, in becoming writers have ceased to belong to the multitude, and the multitude does not read. The difficulties of Western statesmen are due to an opposite cause. The populations are highly articulate. Such is the din of voices that it is hard to say which cry prevails, which is swelled by many, which only by a few, throats. The organs of opinion seem almost as numerous as the people themselves, and they are all engaged in representing their own view as that of the "people." Like other valuable articles, genuine opinion is surrounded by many counterfeits. The one positive test applicable is that of an election, and an election can at best do no more than test the division of opinion between two or three great parties, leaving subsidiary issues uncertain, while in many cases the result depends so much on the personal merits of the candidates as to render interpretation difficult. An American statesman is in no danger of consciously running counter to public opinion, but how is he to discover whether any particular opinion is making or losing way, how is he to gauge the voting strength its advocates can put forth, or the moral authority which its advocates can exert? Elections cannot be further multiplied, for they are too numerous already. The referendum,

or plan of submitting a specific question to the popular vote, is the logical resource, but it is troublesome and costly to take the votes of millions of people over an area so large as that of one of the greater states; much more then is this method difficult to apply in federal matters. This is the first drawback to the rule of public opinion. The choice of persons for offices is only an indirect and often unsatisfactory way of declaring views of policy, and as the elections at which such choices are made come at fixed intervals, time is lost in waiting for the opportunity of delivering the popular judgment.

The framers of the American Constitution may not have perceived that in labouring to produce a balance, as well between the national and state governments as between the executive and Congress, in weakening each single authority in the Government by dividing powers and functions among each of them, they were throwing upon the nation at large, that is, upon unorganized public opinion, more work than it had ever discharged in England, or could duly discharge in a country so divided by distances and jealousies as the United States then were. Distances and jealousies have been lessened. But as the progress of democracy has increased the self-distrust and submission to the popular voice of legislators, so the defects incident to a system of restrictions and balances have been aggravated. Thus the difficulty inherent in government by public opinion makes itself seriously felt. It can express desires, but has not the machinery for turning them into practical schemes. It can determine ends, but is less fit to examine and select means. Yet it has weakened the organs by which the business of finding appropriate means ought to be discharged.

American legislatures are bodies with limited powers and sitting for short terms. Their members are less qualified for the work of constructive legislation, than are those of most European chambers. They are accustomed to consider themselves delegates from their respective states and districts, responsible to those districts, rather than councillors of the whole nation labouring for its general interests; and they have no executive leaders, seeing that no official sits either in Congress or in a state legislature. Hence if at any time the people desire measures which do not merely repeal a law or direct an appropriation, but establish some administrative scheme, or mark out some positive line of financial policy, or provide some body of rules for dealing with such a topic as bankruptcy, railroad or canal communications, the management of public lands, and so forth, the people cannot count on having their wishes put into tangible workable shape. When members of Congress or of a state legislature think the country desires legislation, they begin to prepare bills, but the want of leadership and of constructive skill

often prevents such bills from satisfying the needs of the case, and a timidity which fears to go beyond what opinion desires, may retard the accomplishment of the public wish; while, in the case of state legislatures, constructive skill is seldom present. Public opinion is slow and clumsy in grappling with large problems. It looks at them, talks incessantly about them, complains of Congress for not solving them, is distressed that they do not solve themselves. But they remain unsolved. Vital decisions have usually hung fire longer than they would have been likely to do in European countries. The war of 1812 seemed on the point of breaking out over and over again before it came at last. The absorption of Texas was a question of many years. The extension of slavery question came before the nation in 1819; after 1840 it was the chief source of trouble; year by year it grew more menacing; year by year the nation was seen more clearly to be drifting towards the breakers. Everybody felt that something must be done. But it was the function of no one authority in particular to discover a remedy, as it would have been the function of a cabinet in Europe. I do not say the sword might not in any case have been invoked, for the temperature of Southern feeling had been steadily rising to war point. But the history of 1840–60 leaves an impression of the dangers which may result from fettering the constitutional organs of government, and trusting to public sentiment to bring things right. Some other national questions, less dangerous, but serious, are now in the same condition. The currency question has been an incessant source of disquiet, and it is now many years since the campaign against trusts began. The question of reducing the surplus national revenue puzzled statesmen and the people at large longer than a similar question would be suffered to do in Europe, and when solved in 1890 by the passage of the dependent pension bill, was solved to the public injury in a purely demagogic or electioneering spirit. I doubt whether any European legislature would have so openly declined the duty of considering the interests of the country, and abandoned itself so undisguisedly to the pursuit of the votes of a particular section of the population. And the same thing holds, *mutatis mutandis*, of state governments. In them also there is no set of persons whose special duty it is to find remedies for admitted evils. The structure of the government provides the requisite machinery neither for forming nor for guiding a popular opinion, disposed of itself to recognize only broad and patent facts, and to be swayed only by such obvious reasons as it needs little reflection to follow. Admirable practical acuteness, admirable ingenuity in inventing and handling machinery, whether of iron and wood or of human beings, coexist, in the United States, with an aversion to the investigation

of general principles as well as to trains of systematic reasoning.¹ The liability to be caught by fallacies, the inability to recognize facts which are not seen but must be inferentially found to exist, the incapacity to imagine a future which must result from the unchecked operation of present forces, these are indeed the defects of the ordinary citizen in all countries, and if they are conspicuous in America, it is only because the ordinary citizen, who is more intelligent there than elsewhere, is also more potent.

It may be replied to these observations, which are a criticism as well upon the American frame of government as upon public opinion, that the need for constructive legislation is small in America, because the habit of the country is to leave things to themselves. This is not really the fact. A great state has always problems of administration to deal with; these problems do not become less grave as time runs on, and the hand of government has for years past been more and more invoked in America for many purposes thought to be of common utility with which legislation did not formerly intermeddle.

There is more force in the remark that we must remember how much is gained as well as lost by the slow and hesitating action of public opinion in the United States. So tremendous a force would be dangerous if it moved rashly. Acting over and gathered from an enormous area, in which there exist many local differences, it needs time, often a long time, to become conscious of the preponderance of one set of tendencies over another. The elements both of local difference and of class difference must be (so to speak) well shaken up together, and each part brought into contact with the rest, before the mixed liquid can produce a precipitate in the form of a practical conclusion. And in this is seen the difference between the excellence as a governing power of opinion in the whole Union, and opinion within the limits of a particular state. The systems of constitutional machinery by which public sentiment acts are similar in the greater and in the smaller area; the constitutional maxims practically identical. But public opinion, which moves slowly, and, as a rule, temperately, in the field of national affairs, is sometimes hasty and reckless in state affairs. The population of a state may be of one colour, as that of the Northwestern states is preponderantly agricultural, or may contain few persons of education and political knowledge, or may fall under the influence of a demagogue or a clique, or may be possessed by some local passion. Thus its opinion may

¹ To say this is not to ignore the influence exercised on the national mind by the "glittering generalities" of the Declaration of Independence, nor the theoretical grounds taken up for and against states' rights and slavery, and especially the highly logical scheme excogitated by Calhoun.

want breadth, sobriety, wisdom, and the result be seen in imprudent or unjust measures. The constitution of California of 1879, the legislation of Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin, which beginning with the Granger movement has from time to time annoyed and harassed the railroads without establishing a useful control over them, the tampering with their public debts by several states, are familiar instances of follies, to use no harder name, which local opinion approved, but which would have been impossible in the federal government, where the controlling opinion is that of a large and complex nation, and where the very deficiencies of one section or one class serve to correct qualities which may exist in excess in some other.

The sentiment of the nation at large, being comparatively remote, acts but slowly in restraining the vagaries or curing the faults of one particular state. The dwellers on the Pacific coast care very little for the criticism of the rest of the country on their anti-Hindu or anti-Japanese violence; Pennsylvania and Virginia disregarded the best opinions of the Union when they so dealt with their debts as to affect their credit; those parts of the South in which homicide goes unpunished, except by the relatives of the slain, are unmoved by the reproaches and jests of the more peaceable and well-regulated states. The fact shows how deep the division of the country into self-governing commonwealths goes, making men feel that they have a right to do what they will with their own, so long as the power remains to them, whatever may be the purely moral pressure from those who, though they can advise, have no title to interfere. And it shows also, in the teeth of the old doctrine that republicanism was fit for small communities, that evils peculiar to a particular district, which might be ruinous in that district if it stood alone, become less dangerous when it forms part of a vast country.

We may go on to ask how far American opinion succeeds in the simpler duty, which opinion must discharge in all countries, of supervising the conduct of business, and judging the current legislative work which Congress and other legislatures turn out.

Here again the question turns not so much on the excellence of public opinion as on the adequacy of the constitutional machinery provided for its action. That supervision and criticism may be effective, it must be easy to fix on particular persons the praise for work well done, the blame for work neglected or ill-performed. Experience shows that good men are the better for a sense of their responsibility and ordinary men useless without it. The free governments of Europe and the British colonies have gone on the principle of concentrating power in order to be able to fix responsibility. The American plan of dividing powers, eminent as are its other advantages,

makes it hard to fix responsibility. The executive can usually allege that it had not received from the legislature the authority necessary to enable it to grapple with a difficulty; while in the legislature there is no one person or group of persons on whom the blame due for that omission or refusal can be laid. Suppose some gross dereliction of duty to have occurred. The people are indignant. A victim is wanted, who, for the sake of the example to others, ought to be found and punished, either by law or by general censure. But perhaps he cannot be found, because out of several persons or bodies who have been concerned, it is hard to apportion the guilt and award the penalty. Where the sin lies at the door of Congress, it is not always possible to arraign either the Speaker or the dominant majority, or any particular party leader. Where a state legislature or a city council has misconducted itself, the difficulty is greater, because party ties are less strict in such a body, proceedings are less fully reported, and both parties are apt to be equally implicated in the abuses of private legislation. Not uncommonly there is presented the sight of an exasperated public going about like a roaring lion, seeking whom it may devour, and finding no one. The results in state affairs would be much worse were it not for the existence of the governor with his function of vetoing bills, because in many cases, knowing that he can be made answerable for the passage of a bad measure, he is forced up to the level of a virtue beyond that of the natural man in politics. This tendency to look to him has recently tended to increase his power; and the disposition to seek a remedy for municipal misgovernment in enlarging the functions of the mayor illustrates the same principle.

Although the failures of public opinion in overseeing the conduct of its servants are primarily due to the want of appropriate machinery, they are increased by its characteristic temper. Quick and strenuous in great matters, it is heedless in small matters, overkindly and indulgent in all matters. It suffers weeds to go on growing till they have struck deep root. It has so much to do in looking after both Congress and its state legislature, a host of executive officials, and perhaps a city council also, that it may impartially tolerate the misdoings of all till some important issue arises. Even when jobs are exposed by the press, each particular job seems below the attention of a busy people or the anger of a good-natured people, till the sum total of jobbery becomes a scandal. To catch and to hold the attention of the people is the chief difficulty as well as the first duty of an American reformer.

The long-suffering tolerance of public opinion towards incompetence and misconduct in officials and public men generally, is a feature which has

struck recent European observers. It is the more remarkable because nowhere is executive ability more valued in the management of private concerns, in which the stress of competition forces every manager to secure at whatever price the most able subordinates. We may attribute it partly to the good nature of the people, which makes them overlenient to nearly all criminals, partly to the preoccupation with their private affairs of the most energetic and useful men, who therefore cannot spare time to unearth abuses and get rid of offenders, partly to an indifference induced by the fatalistic sentiment which I have already sought to describe. This fatalism acts in two ways. Being optimistic, it disposes each man to believe that things will come out right whether he "takes hold" himself or not, and that it is therefore no great matter whether a particular ring or boss is suppressed. And in making each individual man feel his insignificance, it disposes him to leave to the multitude the task of setting right what is everyone else's business just as much as his own. An American does not smart under the same sense of personal wrong from the mismanagement of his public business, from the exaction of high city taxes and their malversation, as an Englishman would in the like case. If he suffers, he consoles himself by thinking that he suffers with others, as part of the general order of things, which he is no more called upon than his neighbours to correct.

It may be charged as a weak point in the rule of public opinion, that by fostering this habit it has chilled activity and dulled the sense of responsibility among the leaders in political life. It has made them less eager and strenuous in striking out ideas and plans of their own, less bold in propounding those plans, more sensitive to the reproach, even more feared in America than in England, of being a crotchet-monger or a doctrinaire. That new or unpopular ideas are more frequently started by isolated thinkers, economists, social reformers, than by statesmen, may be set down to the fact that practical statesmanship indisposes men to theorizing. But in America the practical statesman is apt to be timid in advocacy as well as infertile in suggestion. He seems to be always listening for the popular voice, always afraid to commit himself to a view which may turn out unpopular. It is a fair conjecture that this may be due to his being by his profession a far more habitual worshipper as well as observer of public opinion, than will be the case with men who are by profession thinkers and students, men who are less purely Americans of today, because under the influence of the literature of past times as well as of contemporary Europe. Philosophy, taking the word to include the historical study of the forces which work upon mankind at large, is needed by a statesman not only as a consolation for the

disappointments of his career, but as a corrective to the superstitions and tremors which the service of the multitude implants.

The enormous force of public opinion is a danger to the people themselves, as well as to their leaders. It no longer makes them tyrannical, but it fills them with an undue confidence in their wisdom, their virtue, and their freedom. It may be thought that a nation which uses freedom well can hardly have too much freedom; yet even such a nation may be too much inclined to think freedom an absolute and all-sufficient good, to seek truth only in the voice of the majority, to mistake prosperity for greatness. Such a nation, seeing nothing but its own triumphs, and hearing nothing but its own praises, seems to need a succession of men like the prophets of Israel to rouse the people out of their self-complacency, to refresh their moral ideals, to remind them that the life is more than meat, and the body more than raiment, and that to whom much is given of them shall much also be required. If America has no prophets of this order, she fortunately possesses two classes of men who maintain a wholesome irritation such as that which Socrates thought it his function to apply to the Athenian people. These are the instructed critics who exert a growing influence on opinion through the higher newspapers, and by literature generally, and the philanthropic reformers who tell more directly upon the multitude, particularly through the churches. Both classes combined may not as yet be doing all that is needed. But the significant point is that their influence represents not an ebbing but a flowing tide. If the evils they combat exist on a larger scale than in past times, they, too, are more active and more courageous in rousing and reprehending their fellow countrymen.

Wherein Public Opinion Succeeds

In the examination of the actualities of politics as well as of forms of government, faults are more readily perceived than merits. Everybody is struck by the mistakes which a ruler makes, or by evils which a constitution fails to avert, while less praise than is due may be bestowed in respect of the temptations that have been resisted, or the prudence with which the framers of the government have avoided defects from which other countries suffer. Thus the general prosperity of the United States and the success of their people in all kinds of private enterprises, philanthropic as well as gainful, throws into relief the blemishes of their government, and makes it the more necessary to point out in what respects the power of public opinion overcomes those blemishes, and maintains a high level of good feeling and well-being in the nation.

The European observer of the working of American institutions is apt to sum up his conclusions in two contrasts. One is between the excellence of the Constitution and the vices of the party system that has laid hold of it, discovered its weak points, and brought in a swarm of evils. The Fathers, he says, created the Constitution good, but their successors have sought out many inventions.¹ The other contrast is between the faults of the political class and the merits of the people at large. The men who work the machine are often selfish and unscrupulous. The people, for whose behoof it purports to be worked, and who suffer themselves to be "run" by the politicians, are honest, intelligent, fair-minded. No such contrast exists anywhere else in the world. Either the politicians are better than they are in America, or the people are worse.

¹ Though some at least of the faults of the party system are directly due to the structure of the Constitution.

The causes of this contrast, which to many observers has seemed the capital fact of American politics, have been already explained. It brings out the truth, on which too much stress cannot be laid, that the strong point of the American system, the dominant fact of the situation, is the healthiness of public opinion, and the control which it exerts. As Abraham Lincoln said in his famous contest with Douglas, "With public sentiment on its side, everything succeeds; with public sentiment against it, nothing succeeds."

The conscience and common sense of the nation as a whole keep down the evils which have crept into the working of the Constitution, and may in time extinguish them. Public opinion is a sort of atmosphere, fresh, keen, and full of sunlight, like that of the American cities, and this sunlight kills many of those noxious germs which are hatched where politicians congregate. That which, varying a once famous phrase, we may call the genius of universal publicity, has some disagreeable results, but the wholesome ones are greater and more numerous. Selfishness, injustice, cruelty, tricks, and jobs of all sorts shun the light; to expose them is to defeat them. No serious evils, no rankling sore in the body politic, can remain long concealed, and when disclosed, it is half destroyed. So long as the opinion of a nation is sound, the main lines of its policy cannot go far wrong, whatever waste of time and money may be incurred in carrying them out. It was observed in the last chapter that opinion is too vague and indeterminate a thing to be capable of considering and selecting the best means for the end on which it has determined. The counterpart of that remark is that the opinion of a whole nation, a united and tolerably homogeneous nation, is, when at last it does express itself, the most competent authority to determine the ends of national policy.² In European countries, legislatures and cabinets sometimes take decisions which the nation, which had scarcely thought of the matter till the decision has been taken, is ultimately found to disapprove. In America, men feel that the nation is the only power entitled to say what it wants, and that, till it has manifested its wishes, nothing must be done to commit it. It may sometimes be long in speaking, but when it speaks, it speaks with a weight which the wisest governing class cannot claim.

The frame of the American government has assumed and trusted to the

² The distinction between means and ends is, of course, one which it is hard to draw in practice, because most ends are means to some larger end which embraces them. Still if we understand by ends the main and leading objects of national policy, including the spirit in which the government ought to be administered, we shall find that these are, if sometimes slowly, yet more clearly apprehended in America than in Europe, and less frequently confounded with subordinate and transitory issues.

activity of public opinion, not only as the power which must correct and remove the difficulties due to the restrictions imposed on each department, and to possible collisions between them, but as the influence which must supply the defects incidental to a system which works entirely by the machinery of popular elections. Under a system of elections one man's vote is as good as another, the vicious and ignorant have as much weight as the wise and good. A system of elections might be imagined which would provide no security for due deliberation or full discussion, a system which, while democratic in name, recognizing no privilege, and referring everything to the vote of the majority, would in practice be hasty, violent, tyrannical. It is with such a possible democracy that one has to contrast the rule of public opinion as it exists in the United States. Opinion declares itself legally through elections. But opinion is at work at other times also, and has other methods of declaring itself. It secures full discussion of issues of policy and of the characters of men. It suffers nothing to be concealed. It listens patiently to all the arguments that are addressed to it. Eloquence, education, wisdom, the authority derived from experience and high character, tell upon it in the long run, and have, perhaps not always their due influence, but yet a great and growing influence. Thus a democracy governing itself through a constantly active public opinion, and not solely by its intermittent mechanism of elections, tends to become patient, tolerant, reasonable, and is more likely to be unembittered and unvexed by class divisions.

It is the existence of such a public opinion as this, the practice of freely and constantly reading, talking, and judging of public affairs with a view to voting thereon, rather than the mere possession of political rights, that gives to popular government that educative and stimulative power which is so frequently claimed as its highest merit. Those who, in the last generation, were forced to argue for democratic government against oligarchies or despots, were perhaps inclined, if not to exaggerate the value of extended suffrage and a powerful legislature, at least to pass too lightly over the concomitant conditions by whose help such institutions train men to use liberty well. History does not support the doctrine that the mere enjoyment of power fits large masses of men, any more than individuals or classes, for its exercise. Along with that enjoyment there must be found some one or more of various auspicious conditions, such as a direct and fairly equal interest in the common welfare, the presence of a class or group of persons respected and competent to guide, an absence of religious or race hatreds, a high level of education, or at least of intelligence, old habits of local self-government, the practice of unlimited free discussion. In America it is not

simply the habit of voting but the briskness and breeziness of the whole atmosphere of public life, and the process of obtaining information and discussing it, of hearing and judging each side, that form the citizen's intelligence. True it is that he would not gain much from this process did it not lead up to the exercise of voting power: he would not learn so much on the road did not the polling booth stand at the end of it. But if it were his lot, as it is that of the masses in some European countries, to exercise his right of suffrage under few of these favouring conditions, the educational value of the vote would become comparatively small. It is the habit of breathing as well as helping to form public opinion that cultivates, develops, trains the average American. It gives him a sense of personal responsibility stronger, because more constant, than exists in those free countries of Europe where he commits his power to a legislature. Sensible that his eye ought to be always fixed on the conduct of affairs, he grows accustomed to read and judge, not indeed profoundly, sometimes erroneously, usually under party influences, but yet with a feeling that the judgment is his own. He has a sense of ownership in the government, and therewith a kind of independence of manner as well as of mind very different from the demissness of the humbler classes of the Old World. And the consciousness of responsibility which goes along with this laudable pride, brings forth the peaceable fruits of moderation. As the Greeks thought that the old families ruled their households more gently than upstarts did, so citizens who have been born to power, born into an atmosphere of legal right and constitutional authority, are sobered by their privileges. Despite their natural quickness and eagerness, the native Americans are politically patient. They are disposed to try soft means first, to expect others to bow to that force of opinion which they themselves recognize. Opposition does not incense them; danger does not, by making them lose their heads, hurry them into precipitate courses. In no country does a beaten minority take a defeat so well. Admitting that the blood of the race counts for something in producing that peculiar coolness and self-control in the midst of an external effervescence of enthusiasm, which is the most distinctive feature of the American masses, the habit of ruling by public opinion and obeying it counts for even more. It was far otherwise in the South before the war, but the South was not a democracy, and its public opinion was that of a passionate class.

The best evidence for this view is to be found in the educative influence of opinion on newcomers. Anyone can see how severe a strain is put on democratic institutions by the influx every year of nearly a million of untrained Europeans. Being in most states admitted to full civic rights before

they have come to shake off European notions and habits, these strangers enjoy political power before they either share or are amenable to American opinion.³ They follow blindly leaders of their own race, are not moved by discussion, exercise no judgment of their own. This lasts for some years, probably for the rest of life with those who are middle-aged when they arrive. It lasts also with those who, belonging to the more backward races, remain herded together in large masses, and makes them a dangerous element in manufacturing and mining districts. But the younger sort, when, if they be foreigners, they have learnt English, and when, dispersed among Americans so as to be able to learn from them, they have imbibed the sentiments and assimilated the ideas of the country, are thenceforth scarcely to be distinguished from the native population. They are more American than the Americans in their desire to put on the character of their new country. This peculiar gift which the Republic possesses of quickly dissolving and assimilating the foreign bodies that are poured into her, imparting to them her own qualities of orderliness, good sense, and a willingness to bow to the will of the majority, is mainly due to the all-pervading force of opinion, which the newcomer, so soon as he has formed social and business relations with the natives, breathes in daily till it insensibly transmutes him. Their faith, and a sentiment of resentment against England, long kept among the Irish a body of separate opinion, which for a time resisted the solvent power of its American environment. But the public schools finished the work of the factory and the newspapers. The Irish immigrant's son is now an American citizen for all purposes.

It is chiefly the faith in publicity that gives to the American public their peculiar buoyancy, and what one may call their airy hopefulness in discussing even the weak points of their system. They are always telling you that they have no skeleton closets, nothing to keep back. They know, and are content that all the world should know, the worst as well as the best of themselves. They have a boundless faith in free inquiry and full discussion. They admit the possibility of any number of temporary errors and delusions. But to suppose that a vast nation should, after hearing everything, canvassing everything, and trying all the preliminary experiments it has a mind to, ultimately go wrong by mistaking its own true interests, seems to them a sort of blasphemy against the human intelligence and its Creator.

They claim for opinion that its immense power enables them to get on with but little government. Some evils which the law and its officers are in

³ As to recent immigrants, see further in Chapter 92

other countries required to deal with are here averted or cured by the mere force of opinion, which shrivels them up when its rays fall on them. As it is not the product of any one class, and is unwilling to recognize classes at all, for it would stand self-condemned as un-American if it did, it discourages anything in the nature of class legislation. Where a particular section of the people, such, for instance, as the Western farmers or the Eastern operatives, think themselves aggrieved, they clamour for the measures thought likely to help them. The farmers legislated against the railroads, the labour party asks an eight-hour law. But whereas on the European continent such a class would think and act as a class, hostile to other classes, and might resolve to pursue its own objects at whatever risk to the nation, in America national opinion, which everyone recognizes as the arbiter, mitigates these feelings, and puts the advocates of the legislation which any class demands upon showing that their schemes are compatible with the paramount interest of the whole community. To say that there is no legislation in America which, like the class legislation of Europe, has thrown undue burdens on the poor, while jealously guarding the pleasures and pockets of the rich, is to say little, because where the poorer citizens have long been a numerical majority, invested with political power, they will evidently take care of themselves. But the opposite danger might have been feared, that the poor would have turned the tables on the rich, thrown the whole burden of taxation upon them, and disregarded in the supposed interest of the masses what are called the rights of property. Not only has this not been attempted—it has been scarcely even suggested (except, of course, by professed Collectivists as part of a reconstruction of society), and it excites no serious apprehension. There is nothing in the machinery of government that could do more than delay it for a time, did the masses desire it. What prevents it is the honesty and common sense of the citizens generally, who are convinced that the interests of all classes are substantially the same, and that justice is the highest of those interests. Equality, open competition, a fair field to everybody, every stimulus to industry, and every security for its fruits, these they hold to be the self-evident principles of national prosperity.

If public opinion is heedless in small things, it usually checks measures which, even if not oppressive, are palpably selfish or unwise. If before a mischievous bill passes, its opponents can get the attention of the people fixed upon it, its chances are slight. All sorts of corrupt or pernicious schemes which are hatched at Washington or in the state legislatures are abandoned because it is felt that the people will not stand them, although they could be easily pushed through those not too scrupulous assemblies.

There have been instances of proposals which took people at first by their plausibility, but which the criticism of opinion riddled with its unceasing fire till at last they were quietly dropped. It was in this way that President Grant's attempt to annex San Domingo failed. He had made a treaty for the purpose, which fell through for want of the requisite two-thirds majority in the Senate, but he persisted in the scheme until at last the disapproval of the general public, which had grown stronger by degrees and found expression through the leading newspapers, warned him to desist. After the war, there was at first in many quarters a desire to punish the Southern leaders for what they had made the North suffer. But by degrees the feeling died away, the sober sense of the whole North restraining the passions of those who had counselled vengeance; and, as everyone knows, there was never a civil war or rebellion, whichever one is to call it, followed by so few severities.

Public opinion often fails to secure the appointment of the best men to places, but where undivided responsibility can be fixed on the appointing authority, it prevents, as those who are behind the scenes know, countless bad appointments for which politicians intrigue. Considering the power of party managers over the federal executive, and the low sense of honour and public duty as regards patronage among politicians, the leading posts are filled, if not by the most capable men, yet seldom by bad ones. The judges of the Supreme Court, for instance, are, and have always been, men of high professional standing and stainless character. The same may be, though less generally, said of the upper federal officials in the North and West. That no similar praise can be bestowed on the exercise of federal patronage in the Southern states since the war, is an illustration of the view I am stating. As the public opinion of the South (that is to say, of the whites who make opinion there) was steadily hostile to the Republican party, which commanded the executive during the twenty years from 1865 to 1885, the Republican party managers were indifferent to it, because they had nothing to gain or to lose from it. Hence they made appointments without regard to it. Northern opinion knows comparatively little of the details of Southern politics and the character of officials who act there, so that they might hope to escape the censure of their supporters in the North. Hence they jobbed their patronage in the South with unblushing cynicism, using federal posts there as a means not merely of rewarding party services, but also of providing local white leaders and organizers to the coloured Southern Republicans. Their different behaviour there and in the North therefore showed that it was not public virtue, but the fear of public opinion, that was making their

Northern appointments on the whole respectable, while those in the South were at that time so much the reverse. The same phenomenon has been noticed in Great Britain. Jobs are frequent and scandalous in the inverse ratio of the notice they are likely to attract.⁴

In questions of foreign policy, opinion is a valuable reserve force. When demonstrations are made by party leaders intended to capture the vote of some particular section, the native Americans only smile. But they watch keenly the language held and acts done by the State Department (Foreign Office), and, while determined to support the president in vindicating the rights of American citizens, would be found ready to check any demand or act going beyond their legal rights which could tend to embroil them with a foreign power. There is still a touch of spread-eagleism and an occasional want of courtesy and taste among public speakers and journalists when they refer to other countries; and there is a determination in all classes to keep European interference at a distance. But among the ordinary native citizens one finds (I think) less obtrusive selfishness, less chauvinism, less cynicism in declaring one's own national interests to be paramount to those of other states, than in any of the great states of Europe. Justice and equity are more generally recognized as binding upon nations no less than on individuals. Whenever humanity comes into question, the heart of the people is sound. The treatment of the Indians reflects little credit on the Western settlers who have come in contact with them, and almost as little on the federal government, whose efforts to protect them have been often foiled by the faults of its own agents, or by its own want of promptitude and foresight. But the wish of the people at large has always been to deal generously with the aborigines, nor have appeals on their behalf, such as those made by the late Mrs. Helen Jackson, ever failed to command the sympathy and assent of the country.

Throughout these chapters I have been speaking chiefly of the Northern states and chiefly of recent years, for America is a country which changes fast. But the conduct of the Southern people, since their defeat in 1865, illustrates the tendency of underlying national traits to reassert themselves when disturbing conditions have passed away. Before the war the public

⁴ It has often been remarked that posts of the same class are more jobbed by the British executive in Scotland than in England, and in Ireland than in Scotland, because it is harder to rouse Parliament, which in Great Britain discharges much of the function which public opinion discharges in America, to any interest in an appointment made in one of the smaller countries. In Great Britain a minister making a bad appointment has to fear a hostile motion (though Parliament is overlenient to jobs) which may displace him, in the United States a president is under no such apprehension. It is only to opinion that he is responsible.

opinion of the slave states, and especially of the planting states, was practically the opinion of a class—the small and comparatively rich landowning aristocracy. The struggle for the defence of their institution had made this opinion fierce and intolerant. To a hatred of the Abolitionists, whom it thought actuated by the wish to rob and humiliate the South, it joined a misplaced contempt for what it deemed the moneygrubbing and peace-at-any-price spirit of the Northern people generally. So long as the subjugated states were ruled by arms, and the former “rebels” excluded by disfranchisement from the government of their states, this bitterness remained. When the restoration of self-government, following upon the liberation of the Confederate prisoners and the amnesty, had shown the magnanimity of the North, its clemency, its wish to forget and forgive, its assumption that both sides would shake hands and do their best for their common country, the hearts of the Southern men were conquered. Opinion went round. Frankly, one might almost say cheerfully, it recognized the inevitable. It stopped those outrages on the Negroes which the law had been unable to repress. It began to regain “touch” of, it has now almost fused itself with, the opinion of the North and West. No one Southern leader or group can be credited with this; it was the general sentiment of the people that brought it about. Still less do the Northern politicians deserve the praise of the peacemakers, for many among them tried for political purposes to fan or to rekindle the flame of suspicion in the North. It was the opinion of the North generally, more liberal than its guides, which dictated not merely forgiveness, but the restoration of equal civic rights. Nor is this the only case in which the people have proved themselves to have a higher and a truer inspiration than the politicians.

It has been observed that the all-subduing power of the popular voice may tell against the appearance of great statesmen by dwarfing aspiring individualities, by teaching men to discover and obey the tendencies of their age rather than rise above them and direct them. If this happens in America, it is not because the American people fail to appreciate and follow and exalt such eminent men as fortune bestows upon it. It has a great capacity for loyalty, even for hero worship. “Our people,” said an experienced American publicist to me, “are in reality hungering for great men, and the warmth with which even pinchbeck geniuses, men who have anything showy or taking about them, anything that is deemed to betoken a strong individuality, are followed and glorified in spite of intellectual emptiness, and perhaps even moral shortcomings, is the best proof of the fact.” Henry Clay was the darling of his party for many years, as Jefferson, with less of personal

fascination, had been in the preceding generation. Daniel Webster retained the devotion of New England long after it had become clear that his splendid intellect was mated to a far from noble character. A kind of dictatorship was yielded to Abraham Lincoln, whose memory is cherished almost like that of Washington himself. Whenever a man appears with something taking or forcible about him, he becomes the object of so much popular interest and admiration that those cooler heads who perceive his faults, and perhaps dread his laxity of principle, reproach the proneness of their less discerning countrymen to make an idol out of wood or clay. The career of Andrew Jackson is a case in point, though it may be hoped that the intelligence of the people would estimate such a character more truly today than it did in his own day. I doubt if there be any country where a really brilliant man, confident in his own strength, and adding the charm of a striking personality to the gift of popular eloquence, would find an easier path to fame and power, and would exert more influence over the minds and emotions of the multitude. Such a man, speaking to the people with the independence of conscious strength, would find himself appreciated and respected.

Controversy is still bitter, more profuse in personal imputations than one expects to find it where there are no grave issues to excite excitement. But in this respect also there is an improvement. Partisans are reckless, but the mass of the people lends itself less to acrid partisanship than it did in the times just before the Civil War, or in those first days of the Republic which were so long looked back to as a sort of heroic age. Public opinion grows more temperate, more mellow, and assuredly more tolerant. Its very strength disposes it to bear with opposition or remonstrance. It respects itself too much to wish to silence any voice.