

# DEMOCRACY AND THE ACCEPTED FACTS OF HEREDITY

## A Biological View of Government

ALLEYNE IRELAND, F.R.G.S.

---

**I**T WOULD be necessary to go back to the period of the French Revolution and of the American War of Independence to find a public discussion of political principles as voluminous as that which has poured from the printing-presses of the world during the past four years.

Of this vast literature I cannot profess to have read more than a small proportion; but what has fallen under my eye discloses the extremely interesting fact that, after more than two thousand years of controversy about political forms, opinion at the beginning of the twentieth century appears to be unanimous in accepting democracy based upon universal suffrage as the best system of government. Not the least curious phase of this unanimity is that it should have been reached at a time when democracy was engaged in a struggle in which its very existence was for a long time under the gravest threat, and from which it finally emerged triumphant only because it completely abandoned, for the duration of the war, every principle upon which democracy rests.

During the course of the discussions which are now taking place at Versailles every aspect of political practice is certain to be taken up by the delegates, and conventional political theory will, no doubt, receive the homage of oratory. The moment, then, is not inopportune to advance a certain consideration about politics which has hitherto received very scant attention—the bearing of biological laws upon political principles.

It is not without great diffidence that I embark upon this undertaking, for I am not a biologist. A simple explanation will, however, make my position clear. For twenty-five years I have been a student of government; and my studies have taken me to a score of countries, and have made me familiar with a dozen governmental systems, ranging between the extremes of the autocratic and of the democratic forms. The broadest generalisation which my observation justifies—the one subject to the fewest exceptions—is that the best governed countries were those in which the mass of the people had the least control over the administration of public affairs. By “best governed” I mean best provided with internal peace, with justice, with honest and competent officials, with protection for life, property, with freedom of individual action, with arrangements for promoting the general welfare.

To have reached, after very long and very careful investigation, a conclusion so violently opposed to popular opinion and to the teaching of the schools, was sufficiently disturbing to lead me to a reconsideration of the whole subject for the purpose of discovering, if possible, why almost everything I had observed about democratic governments discredited almost everything I had read in their praise. To this task I devoted a great part of my time during 1916 and 1917. I proceed to summarize the results, leaving for a future article, should the matter prove to be of sufficient public interest, a fuller discussion of certain phases which are here but lightly touched upon.

On the level plain of routine, where most of us pass our lives, intelligent men are agreed that in material affairs human progress is best served by expert knowledge and firm leadership, held by the few and by them employed to direct the energy of the mass. The recognition of this fact is, indeed, the regulating principle of commerce, of industry, and of agriculture. In the field of conduct the same principle is accepted—the rare man of high morality as the guide and inspiration for the common run of men. The priest does not poll his flock as to the sinfulness of murder, nor the captain his crew as to the vessel's course, nor the architect his workmen as to the span of the arch, nor the farmer his hands as to the rotation of the crops.

Yet the moment we enter the field of politics we are asked to reverse the whole process of reasoning which has been our guide in the familiar round of duty, and to apply to the most complicated, the most technical, the most pressing problem ever presented to man's genius—the problem of modern government—a method no one has ever applied to his simple, personal affairs; the control of the expert by the inexperienced.

Take a simple case. If I, a student of government, attempt to advise two axmen as to the felling of a tree, the humor of the situation strikes them at once. But if they, the axmen, differ with me as to the comparative merits of a tax levy and a bond issue, of an appointive and an elective judiciary, of specific and ad valorem customs duties, no one's sense of humor intervenes to prevent the axmen making their view prevail at the next election.

The assumption in the former case is that their judgment is better than mine. In the latter that mine is better than theirs. But, whereas, in the former case their rightness and not their number is properly accepted as the determining cause of action, in the latter the issue is held to be properly decided by *their* number and not by *my* rightness.

The explanation of this phenomenon is, in fact, simple. The principles upon which we act in our non-political capacities have been gradually evolved through a process of trial and error, and they represent a qualitative foundation for authority. The determining principles of modern political action were on the contrary, evolved in the heat of revolutions, and represent a quantitative foundation for authority. They were given their currency by rhetoric and not by reason; and they were surrounded, through the violence attending their birth, with a sanctity which has imparted to all criticism of their eternal truth the odium of sacrilege.

From these causes, and from our blind acceptance of a religious doctrine—the natural rights of man—as a practical political principle, we have fallen into a rhapsodical posture toward the democratic form of government. That this posture reflects the influence of an ultra-rational sanction is suggested by the circumstance that when, after a century or two of democratic control, democracy finds its public affairs besmirched by corruption and bedevilled by incompetence, the cry ascends to heaven "Give us *more* democracy, and all will be well!"

This is precisely the reaction of the drug-fiend. The worse his symptoms become, the louder does he call for a larger allowance of his drug. We have, in a word, brought ourselves to regard democracy as a magic elixir which, if we take enough of it, will transmute the base metal of human frailty into a glittering amalgam of virtue, wisdom, and gentleness.

So general opinion has taken up a position behind two points of defense, one that mental and moral habits acquired during the lifetime of the parents can be transmitted to offspring, the other that the law of heredity applies only to physical traits. That these theories are mutually destructive has not in any way affected their popularity amongst those who do not know that each of them is false.

Those who assume the task of reconciling the facts of democratic control with its theory adopt an expedient which places the whole issue beyond the reach of reason. They lay down the rule that democracy must not be judged by its yesterday or by its today, but by its tomorrow; and that so fast as tomorrows become yesterdays even so fast must all adverse evidence be discarded as worthless. Just below the ever-receding horizon of time there lies, almost in sight of those who accept this rule, the pleasant land where education and dietetics shall have made the majority of mankind into political units from which there can be built up a government of benevolence, righteousness, and efficiency.

#### THE BIOLOGICAL FACTOR IN POLITICS

My strong dissent from this view of politics rests mainly upon four broad grounds:

1. That acquired characteristics are not inheritable.
2. That within the field of man's mental and moral traits there operate immutable laws analogous to those, which are almost universally accepted by biologists, for physical inheritance.
3. That assortative mating operates unremittingly to depress one end of the moral and intellectual scale and to elevate the other.
4. That the individual and not the mass is the main source of human advancement.

Now these statements are either true or false. Of the first three biologists alone are competent to express an authoritative judgment. In my mouth they are no more than opinions. Subject, however, to what biologists may determine to be their value, it is clear that, if they are true, the whole argument for democratic government falls to the ground, or, more precisely, the argument that efficiency in government arises from, or can be made to depend upon its democratic quality.

The non-inheritance of acquired traits deals a fatal blow to the com-

mon belief that education can give the offspring of educated parents a better natural endowment than the offspring of uneducated parents. Our misconception of the function which education performs has, indeed, become embedded in the English language, for we employ the word "education" in the sense of training or instruction, whereas its fundamental meaning is "bringing out." This distinction goes to the very root of the matter. Education *can* bring out that which is in a man; it *cannot* put into a man that which is not there. It can impart facts to ignorance (ad-ducate, if there were such a word); but it cannot make a dullard bright or a fool sagacious. It is, of course, highly desirable that each generation should be, as it were, dipped by the schools into the ocean of fact, even though, for most of us, the point of saturation is very quickly reached.

Government, however, does not derive its efficiency from a mere knowledge of facts, but from their intelligent interpretation; and the reason why education cannot have a cumulative effect upon government is that intelligence cannot be taught and that knowledge cannot be inherited.

Few persons, I imagine, will refuse their assent to the statement that any political system, however perfect its mechanism, must be rendered wholly ineffective if its administration is entrusted to men of low intelligence. But it is a matter of common observation that intelligence is a quality native to some minds and foreign to others; that is to say, it is born in the brain and cannot be imparted to it from without. Those who have it possess something which cannot be bestowed or withheld by the authority of a monarch or by the vote of an assembly. Perhaps the most acute observation which has been made about the Germans is that they know everything and understand nothing.

What is true of intelligence is true also of the other mental qualities; and it is of the utmost importance to the

present enquiry that we should know whether these qualities, which cannot be produced by education, are transmitted by inheritance. So far as this question relates to genius it has been the subject of a number of researches, of which Francis Galton's "Hereditary Genius" is a familiar example. But so far as it relates to all the mental qualities—good and bad, strong and weak—I know of but one careful and extensive investigation, that contained in Dr. Frederick Adams Woods's "Mental and Moral Heredity in Royalty."

From an elaborate study of the royal families of Europe during four centuries, Dr. Woods reaches the conclusion that mental and moral differences are almost entirely due to the influence of heredity, and that they are but slightly affected by environment. Dr. Woods's investigation is, so far as I am aware, the first in which the influences of heredity and of environment in man have been separated and measured. Of great interest from the political and social standpoint is the correlation between mental and moral qualities, which Dr. Woods's figures revealed. Averages show that persons strong in mental qualities are usually strong in moral qualities as well.

#### IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP

To these facts about the hereditary quality of mental and moral traits another must be added if a full appreciation of their force is to be reached. Throughout all human society there is a strong tendency for like to mate with like—the rich with the rich, the successful with the successful, the poor with the poor, the intelligent with the intelligent. This tendency exerts a powerful cumulative influence, which is

constantly widening the gulf which separates mediocrity from talent; and the lapse of time is, therefore, making, talented families more talented, and forcing others further and further below the line of mediocrity. It appears, then, that mankind is not breeding towards an average, but towards two extremes.

I pass finally to what history teaches us of the importance of greatness in the individual. The question resolves itself actually into a choice between a qualitative and a quantitative theory of causation in human achievement.

To whatever phase of human development we turn, history fails to furnish a single instance in which an accomplished step in human progress can be referred, ultimately, to any cause other than the quality of greatness in the individual. It is this quality which has given the world all that has ennobled man's character, elevated his culture, and extended his mastery over the material elements of life. It is to the genius of a few hundred individuals among the thousands of millions who have lived, that we owe all the inspiration of religion, philosophy, music, art, and literature; all the benefactions of science, discovery, and invention.

We appear to be at the threshold of an era in which the last shred of authority is to be stripped from wisdom and talent, in which the destiny of the world is finally to be committed to the blind God of Numbers. If biology can enforce a teaching by which this catastrophe may be averted, the interest of humanity demands that the effort should be made before the hour of its possibilities has vanished.

---

#### Assistant Secretary Ousley Tells Need For Still More Food Production

Declaring that "this situation and the fact that 2,000,000 men in France hardly could be demobilized in time to restore normal farm labor conditions for the next year's planting and cultivation," Clarence Ousley, Assistant

Secretary of Agriculture, in an address before the New York Humanitarian Society, said that city people must help the farmers in even larger numbers in 1919 to insure adequate harvests of food crops.