

Rev. Dr. Owen B. McGuire

How 'Democracy' Worked In A Many-Party System

I have said that the countries of Continental Europe have never known democracy as we understand it. I mean, of course, democracy as a system of government; for democracy is a way of life not a form of national government and may exist and has in fact existed, better in monarchies than it has in some republics. It exists best, I believe, where there is most local freedom; where, namely, the small local units are allowed to manage their own affairs without interference by the national government. The more restricted such local freedom is, the more restricted is also personal freedom. The founders of this Republic saw that and provided accordingly.

It would not be just to lump all the countries of Continental Europe in the same category in this respect. For this vicious many-party system there are various causes in various countries. I will try to explain this at another time. As a concrete example of the system let us take Spain as it was under the monarchy. And what I say of Spain can, mutatis mutandis, be applied to France, Italy and Portugal during the same period.

The government—the Executive or Administration as we call it in this country—depends for its life on a majority in the Parliament. It—the government, which is also called the Ministry—is composed of, let us say, twelve Ministers. Secretaries we would call them in the U. S. They represent almost as many parties in the parliament, although usually the party to which the Prime Minister belongs is represented by three or four. How these are brought together and temporarily kept together will I think appear more intelligible if we consider how a government falls and another has to be formed to take its place.

HOW IT WORKS

Let us suppose such a government in office and having a majority in the Parliament. One of the Ministers becomes dissatisfied with some public policy advocated by his colleagues. I might say here that the Ministers composing the government are not necessarily the "leaders" of the various parties. A "leader" often appoints one of his henchmen, himself remaining on the sidelines. This insures his "independence" and irresponsibility for what may occur. But one of the Ministers resigns. Usually the reason is not really that he personally disagrees with what the cabinet is doing, or because it is not for the common good; but because the following he depends on in the parliament, or the local bosses back in the constituencies that elected his followers, are not getting all they bargained for when he entered the government. His resignation does not necessarily mean the fall of the government. It creates what they call "a partial crisis." If his party has not a large following in the parliament, the Prime Minister may by a bargain with some other party, waiting for its share of the spoils, find another to take his place, and the "crisis" is over. But if several Ministers become disgruntled and resign the Prime Minister may not be able to replace them and keep a majority in the parliament. This creates a "total crisis." The whole Ministry resigns and the Prime Minister places the resignation in the hands of the King (or President—it doesn't really matter which). Then begins what may be called the vicious circle. The resignation

of the whole Cabinet does not, as it does or used to be in England, mean an appeal to the electorate. First the Prime Minister "consults" with the King. The King may, and usually did, advise the Prime Minister to form a new government. The Prime Minister then consults the leaders of other parties. If he can get enough of these with a majority in the parliament, he comes back and informs the King and the King accepts the new government. If the Prime Minister falls in his "consultations" with the leaders he informs the King, and the King calls in another leader and advises him to form a government. If he refuses or if he fails the King calls another leader who may again refuse or fail. And so the "crisis" continues; and every morning the papers appear with big headlines: "Crisis unsolved." "The Consultations Continue."

SHOWS VICIOUSNESS

If and when the "crisis" cannot be solved with the actual parliament, then and then only an appeal to the electorate becomes necessary. What happens then shows the viciousness of the system, and its hopelessness as a democracy where the will of the people would prevail. There was no one party in office that would be held responsible, and there was no one party in opposition capable of taking over the government and becoming responsible. Hence also there is now no one party that can make an appeal to the electorate. In this situation (of an insoluble "crisis") the King (or President) calls in a leader of some group and commissions him to form a government "to make" the elections. This is literally the phrase that was current in Spanish politics for a century—hacer las elecciones.

The "leader" thus commissioned by the King (or President) may have been one of the Cabinet that fell, or he may be the "leader" of a group not represented in that Cabinet, or he may be one who was not a member of the parliament at all. (This latter happened in the Spanish elections of Feb. 1936.) He forms a government. This government during its short rule is not dependent on parliament. Parliament has been dissolved. Its office is "to make the elections"—and it makes them. Its Ministers have full control of the machinery of the elections. It has (in the Minister of the Interior) full control of the police force, which in those countries is not local or provincial as in the U. S. but national, or, as we would say, Federal. With all these forces in hand they usually can obtain a return at the top of the polls. They have made the elections. The returns depend also on the local bosses back in the constituencies; and these bosses care not a tinker's dam about the "ideology" of the component parts of the government. What these bosses want is to be little monarchs in their own little realms. Their support of the government candidates will depend on what these candidates can promise them; and as a government already in power is a surer bet, they usually support the government. They believe, very naturally, in the proverb, "better the devil you know than the devil you don't know."

These are only some evils of the system; but there is not space at present for more of them. The result was that the people of those countries lost faith in parliamentarism. I have known whole constituencies in those countries where not 10 per cent of the electorate ever went to the polls; and if you asked them, when they grumbled about "those scoundrels who govern us," why they didn't use the ballot and turn the scoundrels out, the reply which became a proverb was "What's the use. The government always wins." And even if they did go to the polls the government counted the votes; and even, again, if the scoundrels were turned out, another band of scoundrels took their place and the farce began again. This was the primal cause of the dictatorships, especially in the "Latin" countries.

LITURGICAL DAY

Atchison, Kan.—The first Liturgical Day for Kansas, growing out of the National Liturgical Weeks of the last two years, was held at St. Benedict's Abbey here. Under the patronage of the Most Rev. Paul C. Schulte, Bishop of Leavenworth, the clergy of the three Kansas dioceses met to discuss aspects of the liturgy teaching parish...

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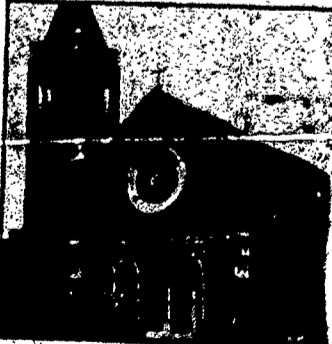
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BEG PARDON!

To the Editor: Sir, some printers' errors in my contribution of last week will, I fear, lead the reader to suspect that I am, like my countryman Pelagius, "an ignorant dolt whose brain has been clogged with Irish straboums." I am made to say that St. Ita's Ode is a specimen of pagan poetry! I did write that Dr. Sigerson divides his book into seven sections, that the second of these sections deals with the "Early Christian period," and that the first specimen given by Dr. Sigerson of that period is St. Ita's Ode. In speaking of alliteration as a beautifying element (as the Doctor claims) I wrote that attempts at beautifying can be overdone—for instance with the lipstick. I certainly did not write that "beautifying poetry" could be overdone with the lipstick.—O. B. M.