

Outer Circle comes nearer to including the whole nation than does the Outer Circle of England. Thus the influence which counterworks that of professionals is the influence of public opinion expressing itself constantly through its countless voices in the press, and more distinctly at frequent intervals by the ballot-box. I say "counterworks," because, while in Europe the leaders and still more the average legislators share and help to make public opinion, in the United States the politician stands rather outside, and regards public opinion as a factor to be reckoned with, much as the sailor regards the winds and currents that affect his course. His primary aim, unless he be exceptionally disinterested, is place and income: and it is in this sense that he may be described as a member of a definite profession.

CHAPTER LVIII

WHY THE BEST MEN DO NOT GO INTO POLITICS

"BUT," some one will say, who has read the reasons just assigned for the development of a class of professional politicians, "you allow nothing for public spirit. It is easy to show why the prize of numerous places should breed a swarm of office-seekers, not so easy to understand why the office-seekers should be allowed to have this arena of public life in a vast country, a free country, an intelligent country, all to themselves. There ought to be patriotic citizens ready to plunge into the stream and save the boat from drifting towards the rapids. They would surely have the support of the mass of the people who must desire honest and economical administration. If such citizens stand aloof, there are but two explanations possible. Either public life must be so foul that good men cannot enter it, or good men must be sadly wanting in patriotism."

This kind of observation is so common in European mouths as to need an explicit answer. The answer is two-fold.

In the first place, the arena is not wholly left to the professionals. Both the Federal and the State legislatures contain a fair proportion of upright and disinterested men, who enter chiefly, or largely, from a sense of public duty, and whose presence keeps the mere professionals in order. So does public opinion, deterring even the bad men from the tricks to which they are prone, and often driving them, when detected in a serious offence, from place and power.

However, this first answer is not a complete answer, for it must be admitted that the proportion of men of intellectual and social eminence who enter public life is smaller in America than it has been during the present century in each of the free countries of Europe. Does this fact indicate a want of public spirit?

It is much to be wished that in every country public spirit were the chief motive propelling men into public life. But is it so anywhere now? Has it been so at any time in a nation's history? Let any one in England, dropping for the moment that self-righteous attitude of which Englishmen are commonly accused by foreigners, ask himself how many of those whom he knows as mixing in the public life of his own country have entered it from motives primarily patriotic, how many have been actuated by the love of fame or power, the hope of advancing their social pretensions or their business relations. There is nothing necessarily wrong in such forms of ambition; but if we find that they count for much in the public life of one country, and for comparatively little in the public life of another, we must expect to find the latter able to reckon among its statesmen fewer persons of eminent intelligence and energy.

Now there are several conditions present in the United States, conditions both constitutional and social, conditions independent either of political morality or of patriotism, which make the ablest citizens less disposed to enter political life than they would otherwise be, or than persons of the same class are in Europe. I have already referred to some of these, but recapitulate them shortly here because they are specially important in this connection.

The want of a social and commercial capital is such a cause. To be a Federal politician you must live in Washington, that is, abandon your circle of home friends, your profession or business, your local public duties. But to live in Paris or London is of itself an attraction to many Englishmen and Frenchmen.

There is no class in America to which public political life comes naturally, scarcely any families with a sort of hereditary right to serve the State. Nobody can get an early and easy start on the strength of his name and connections, as still happens in several European countries.

In Britain or France a man seeking to enter the higher walks of public life has more than five hundred seats for which he may stand. If his own town or county is impossible he goes elsewhere. In the United States he cannot. If his own district is already filled by a member of his own party, there

is nothing to be done, unless he will condescend to undermine and supplant at the next nominating convention the sitting member. If he has been elected and happens to lose his own re-nomination or re-election, he cannot re-enter Congress by any other door. The fact that a man has served gives him no claim to be allowed to go on serving. In the West, rotation is the rule. No wonder that, when a political career is so precarious, men of worth and capacity hesitate to embrace it. They cannot afford to be thrown out of their life's course by a mere accident.¹

Politics are less interesting than in Europe. The two kinds of questions which most attract eager or ambitious minds, questions of foreign policy and of domestic constitutional change, are generally absent, happily absent. Currency and tariff questions and financial affairs generally, internal improvements, the regulation of railways and so forth, are important, no doubt, but to some minds not fascinating. How few people in the English or French legislatures have mastered them, or would relish political life if it dealt with little else! There are no class privileges or religious inequalities to be abolished. Religion, so powerful a political force in Europe, is outside politics altogether.

In most European countries there has been for many years past an upward pressure of the poorer or the unprivileged masses, a pressure which has seemed to threaten the wealthier and more particularly the landowning class. Hence members of the latter class have had a strong motive for keeping tight hold of the helm of state. They have felt a direct personal interest in sitting in the legislature and controlling the administration of their country. This has not been so in America. Its great political issues have not hitherto been class issues. On the contrary there has been, till within the last few years, so great and general a sense of economic security, whether well or ill founded I do not now inquire, that the wealthy and educated have been content to leave the active work of politics alone.

¹ The tendency in Switzerland to re-elect the same men to the legislature and to public office has doubtless worked as much for good in politics there as the opposite tendency works for evil in the United States. Men who have supported measures which their constituency disapproves are often re-elected because they are thought honest and capable. The existence of the *referendum* facilitates this.

The division of legislative authority between the Federal Congress and the legislatures of the States further lessens the interest and narrows the opportunities of a political career. Some of the most useful members of the English Parliament have been led to enter it by their zeal for philanthropic schemes and social reforms. Others enter because they are interested in foreign politics or in commercial questions. In the United States foreign politics and commercial questions belong to Congress, so no one will be led by them to enter the legislature of his State. Social reforms and philanthropic enterprises belong to the State legislatures, so no one will be led by them to enter Congress. The limited sphere of each body deprives it of the services of many active spirits who would have been attracted by it had it dealt with both these sets of matters, or with the particular set of matters in which their own particular interest happens to lie.

In America there are more easy and attractive openings into other careers than in most European countries. The settlement of the great West, the making and financing of railways, the starting of industrial or commercial enterprises in the newer States, all offer a tempting field to ambition, ingenuity, and self-confidence. A man without capital or friends has a better chance than in Europe, and as the scale of undertakings is vaster, the prizes are more seductive. Hence much of the practical ability which in the Old World goes to Parliamentary politics or to the civil administration of the state, goes in America into business, especially into railways and finance. No class strikes one more by its splendid practical capacity than the class of railroad men. It includes administrative rulers, generals, diplomatists, financiers, of the finest gifts. And in point of fact (as will be more fully shown later) the railroad kings have of late years swayed the fortunes of American citizens more than the politicians.

The fascination which politics have for many people in England is largely a social fascination. Those who belong by birth to the upper classes like to support their position in county society by belonging to the House of Commons, or by procuring either a seat in the House of Lords, or the lord-lieutenancy of their county, or perhaps a post in the royal household. The easiest path to these latter dignities lies

through the Commons. Those who spring from the middle class expect to find by means of politics an entrance into a more fashionable society than they have hitherto frequented. Their wives will at least be invited to the party receptions, or they may entertain a party chieftain when he comes to address a meeting in their town. Such inducements scarcely exist in America. A congressman, a city mayor, even a State governor, gains nothing socially by his position. There is indeed, except in a few Eastern cities with exclusive sets, really nothing in the nature of a social prize set before social ambition, while the career of political ambition is even in those cities wholly disjoined from social success. The only exception to this rule occurs in Washington, where a senator or cabinet minister enjoys *ex officio* a certain social rank.¹

None of these causes is discreditable to America, yet, taken together, they go far to account for the large development of the professional element among politicians. Putting the thing broadly, one may say that in America, while politics are relatively less interesting than in Europe and lead to less, other careers are relatively more interesting and lead to more.²

It may however be alleged that I have omitted one significant ground for the distaste of "the best people" for public life, viz. the bad company they would have to keep, the general vulgarity of tone in politics, the exposure to invective or ribaldry by hostile speakers and a reckless press.

I omit this ground because it seems insignificant. In every country a politician has to associate with men whom he despises and distrusts, and those whom he most despises and distrusts are sometimes those whose so-called social rank is highest —

¹ It is the same in some, though by no means in all, of the cantons of Switzerland. Office carries little or no social consideration with it. In some cantons the old families have so completely withdrawn or become so completely shut out from public office, federal or cantonal, that it would be assumed that a politician was necessarily a plebeian. I remember to have been told in Bern of a foreign diplomatist who, strolling with one of the old patricians of the city, stopped at the door of the Government offices. "Where are you going?" asked the patrician. "To see one of your ministers on business." "You don't mean that you are going to speak to one of that *canaille!*" was the reply. The minister was, as Swiss statesmen generally are, a perfectly respectable man; but to a Bernese Junker his being a minister was enough to condemn him.

² This is true even of eminence in letters or art. A great writer or eloquent preacher is more honoured and valued in America than in England.

the sons or brothers of great nobles. In every country he is exposed to misrepresentation and abuse, and the most galling misrepresentations are not the coarse and incredible ones, but those which have a semblance of probability, which delicately discolour his motives and ingeniously pervert his words. A statesman must soon learn, even in decorous England or punctilious France or polished Italy, to disregard all this, and rely upon his conscience for his peace of mind, and upon his conduct for the respect of his countrymen. If he can do so in England or France or Italy, he may do so in America also. No more there than in Europe has any upright man been written down, for though the American press is unsparing, the American people are shrewd, and sometimes believe too little rather than too much evil of a man whom the press assails. Although therefore one hears the pseudo-European American complain of newspaper violence, and allege that it keeps him and his friends from doing their duty by their country, and although it sometimes happens that the fear of newspaper attacks deters a good citizen from exposing some job or jobber, still I could not learn the name of any able and high-minded man of whom it could be truly said that through this cause his gifts and virtues had been reserved for private life. The roughness of politics has, no doubt, some influence on the view which wealthy Americans take of a public career, but these are just the Americans who think that European politics are worked, to use the common phrase, "with kid gloves," and they are not the class most inclined anyhow to come to the front for the service of the nation. Without denying that there is recklessness in the American press, and a notable want of refinement in politics generally, I doubt whether these phenomena have anything like the importance which European visitors are taught, and willingly learn, to attribute to them. Far more weight is to be laid upon the difficulties which the organization of the party system, to be described in the following chapters, throws in the way of men who seek to enter public life. There is, as we shall see, much that is disagreeable, much that is even humiliating, in the initial stages of a political career, and doubtless many a pilgrim turns back after a short experience of this Slough of Despond.

To explain the causes which keep so much of the finest intellect of the country away from national business is one thing, to deny the unfortunate results would be quite another. Unfortunate they certainly are. But the downward tendency observable since the end of the Civil War seems to have been arrested. When the war was over, the Union saved, and the curse of slavery gone for ever, there came a season of contentment and of lassitude. A nation which had surmounted such dangers seemed to have nothing more to fear. Those who had fought with tongue and pen and rifle, might now rest on their laurels. After long-continued strain and effort, the wearied nerve and muscle sought repose. It was repose from political warfare only. For the end of the war coincided with the opening of a time of swift material growth and abounding material prosperity, in which industry and the development of the West absorbed more and more of the energy of the people. Hence a neglect of the details of politics by the better class of voters such as had never been seen before. The last few years have brought a revival of interest in public affairs, and especially in the management of cities. There is more speaking and writing and thinking, practical and definite thinking, upon the principles of government than at any previous epoch. Good citizens are beginning to put their hands to the machinery of government; and it is noticed that those who do so are, more largely than formerly, young men, who have not contracted the bad habits which the practice of politics has engendered among many of their elders, and who will in a few years have become an even more potent force than they are now. If the path to Congress and the State legislatures and the higher municipal offices were cleared of the stumbling-blocks and dirt heaps which now encumber it, cunningly placed there by the professional politicians, a great change would soon pass upon the composition of legislative bodies, and a new spirit be felt in the management of State and municipal as well as of national affairs.