CHAPTER LXXIII

FURTHER OBSERVATIONS ON NOMINATIONS AND ELECTIONS

SEVERAL questions may have occurred to the European reader who has followed the foregoing account of presidential nominations and elections.

The most obvious is — How comes it that a system of nomination by huge party assemblies has grown up so unlike anything which the free countries of Europe have seen?

The nominating convention is the natural and legitimate outgrowth of two features of the Constitution, the restricted functions of Congress and the absolute sovereignty of the people. It was soon perceived that under the rule of party, a party must be united on its candidate in order to have a prospect of success. There was therefore need for a method of selecting the candidate which the whole of a party would recognize as fair and entitled to respect. At first the representatives of the party in Congress assumed the right of nomination. But it was presently felt that they were not entitled to it, for they had not been chosen for any such purpose, and the President was not constitutionally responsible to them, but rather set up to check them. When the congressional caucus had been discredited, the State legislatures tried their hands at nominations; but acting irregularly, and with a primary regard to local sentiment, they failed to win obedience. It began to be seen that whom the people were to elect the people must also nominate. Thus presently the tumultuous assemblies of active politicians were developed into regular representative bodies, modelled after Congress, and giving to the party in each State exactly the same weight in nominating as the State possessed in voting. The elaborate nominating scheme of primaries and conventions which was being constructed for the purpose of city, State, and congressional elections, was applied to the election of the President, and the national convention was the result. We may call it an effort of nature to fill the void left in America by the absence of the European parliamentary or cabinet system, under which an executive is called into being out of the legislature by the majority of the legislature. In the European system no single act of nomination is necessary, because the leader of the majority comes gradually to the top in virtue of his own strength.[1] In America there must be a single and formal act: and this act must emanate from the people, since it is to them that the party leader, when he becomes chief magistrate, will be responsible. There is not quite so strong a reason for entrusting to the convention the function of declaring the aims and tenets of the party in its platform, for this might properly be done by a caucus of the legislature. But as the President is, through his veto power, an independent branch of the legislature, the moment of nominating him is apt for a declaration of the doctrines whereof the party makes him the standard-bearer.

What have been the effects upon the public life of the country of this practice of nomination by conventions? Out of several I select two. Politics have turned largely upon the claims of rival personalities. The victory of a party in a presidential election depends upon its being unanimous in its support of a particular candidate. It must therefore use every effort to find, not necessarily the best man, but the man who will best unite it. In the pursuit of him, it is distracted from its consideration of the questions on which it ought to appeal to the country, and may form its views on them hastily or loosely. The convention is the only body authorized to declare the tenets and practical programme of the party. But the duty of declaring them is commonly overshadowed by the other duty of choosing the candidate, which naturally excites warmer feelings in the hearts of actual or potential office-holders. Accordingly,

[1] The nearest parallel to the American nominating system is the selection of their leader by the Opposition in the House of Commons, of which there has been only one instance, the choice of Lord Hartington by the Liberal members in that House in 1875; and on that occasion the other candidates withdrew before a vote was needed. The selection of a prime minister is the act of the Crown. If he sits in the House of Commons, he naturally leads it; if in the other house, he chooses one of his colleagues to lead in the Commons. What the Americans call "House caucuses," *i.e.* meetings of a party in the larger House of the legislature, are not uncommon in England.

delegates are chosen by local conventions rather as the partisans of this or that aspirant than as persons of political ability or moral weight; and the function of formulating the views of the party may be left to, and ill discharged by, men of an inferior type.

A further result will have been foreseen by those who have realized what these conventions are like. They are monster meetings. Besides the nine hundred delegates, there are some ten to fourteen thousand spectators on the floor and in the galleries, while at Chicago in 1860, there were also thousands on the roof. It goes without saying that such a meeting is capable neither of discussing political questions and settling a political programme, nor of deliberately weighing the merits of rival aspirants for the nomination. Its platform must be presented to it cut and dry, and this is the work of a small committee. In choosing a candidate, it must follow a few leaders.[1] And what sort of leaders do conventions tend to produce? Two sorts — the intriguer and the declaimer. There is the man who manipulates delegates and devises skilful combinations. There is also the orator, whose physical gifts, courage, and readiness enable him to browbeat antagonists, overawe the chairman, and perhaps, if he be possessed of eloquence, carry the multitude away in a fit of enthusiasm. For men of wisdom and knowledge, not seconded by a commanding voice and presence, there is no demand, and little chance of usefulness, in these tempestuous halls.

Why, however, it may also be asked, should conventions be so pre-eminently tempestuous, considering that they are not casual concourses, but consist of persons duly elected, and are governed by a regular code of procedure? The reason may be found in the fact that in them are united the two conditions which generate excitement, viz., very large numbers, and important issues to be determined. In no other modern assemblies[2]

[1] Hamilton had acutely remarked in 1788 that the larger an assembly, the greater is the power of a few in it. See Vol. I. p. 195.

[2] In the ancient world the assemblies of great democratic cities like Athens or Syracuse presented both these conditions; they had large numbers present, and almost unlimited powers. But they were at any rate permanent bodies, accustomed to meet frequently, composed of men who knew one another, who respected certain leaders, and applauded the same orators. The American convention consists of men who come together once only in their lives, and then for a week or less.

do these conditions concur. Modern deliberative assemblies are comparatively small — the House of Representatives has only 356 members; the French Chamber 584; while in the British House of Commons there is sitting space for only 400. Large popular gatherings, on the other hand, such as mass meetings, are excitable in virtue of their size, but have nothing to do but pass resolutions, and there is seldom controversy over these, because such meetings are attended only by those who agree with the summoners. But a national convention consists of more than eight hundred delegates, as many alternates, and some twelve thousand spectators. It is the hugest mass meeting the world knows of. Not only, therefore, does the sympathy of numbers exert an unequalled force, but this host, larger than the army with which the Greeks conquered at Marathon, has an issue of the highest and most exciting nature to decide, an issue which quickens the pulse even of those who read in cold blood afterwards how the votes fell as the roll of States was called, and which thrills those who see and listen, and, most of all, those who are themselves concerned as delegates, with an intensity of emotion surpassing, in proportion to the magnitude of the issue, that which attends the finish of a well-contested boat race. If you wish to realize the passionate eagerness of an American convention, take the House of Commons or the French Chamber, during a division which is to decide the fate of a ministry and a policy, and raising the numbers present twenty-fold, imagine the excitement twenty-fold hotter. Wanting those wonderful scenes which a great debate and division in Parliament provide the English with, America has evolved others not less dramatic. The contrast between the two countries is perhaps most marked in this, that in Parliament the strife is between two parties, in an American convention between the adherents of different leaders belonging to the same party. We might have expected that in the more democratic country more would turn upon principles, less upon men. It is exactly the other way. The struggle in a convention is over men, not over principles.

These considerations may serve to explain to a European the strange phenomena of a convention. But his inquiry probably extends itself to the electoral campaign which follows. "Why," he asks, "is the contest so much longer, more strenuous, and more absorbing than the congressional elections, or than any

election struggle in Europe, although Europe is agitated by graver problems than now occupy America? And why does a people externally so cool, self-contained, and unimpulsive as the American work itself up into a fever of enthusiasm over an issue of little permanent importance between two men, neither of whom will do much good or can do much harm?"

The length of the contest is a survival. The Americans themselves regret it, for it sadly interrupts both business and pleasure. It is due to the fact that when communication was difficult over a rough and thinly settled country, several months were needed to enable the candidates and their orators to go round. Now railways and telegraphs have drawn the continent so much together that five or six weeks would be sufficient. That the presidential election is fought more vehemently than congressional elections seems due to its coming only half as often; to the fact that the President is the dispenser of Federal patronage, and to the habit formed in days when the President was the real head of the party, and his action in foreign affairs was important, of looking on his election as the great trial of party strength. Besides, it is the choice of one officer by the whole country, a supreme political act in which every voter has a share, and the same share; an act which fills the whole of the party in all of the States with the sense that it is feeling and thinking and willing as one heart and mind. This simultaneity of effort, this concentration of interest upon one person and one polling day, gives to the struggle a sort of tension not to be looked for where a number of elections of different persons are going on in as many different spots, nor always at the same time. In congressional elections each constituency has to think first of itself and its own candidate. In the presidential elections all eyes are fixed on the same figure; the same personal as well as political issue is presented to the nation. Each polling district in a State, each State in the Union, emulates every other in the efforts it puts forth to carry the party ticket.

To explain why the hard-headed self-possessed Americans go so wild with excitement at election times is a more difficult task. See what the facts are: There has not been a single presidential candidate, since Abraham Lincoln's re-election in 1864 (always excepting General Grant), of whom his friends

could say that he had done anything to command the gratitude of the nation. Some of these candidates had been skilful party leaders, others had served with credit in the Civil War. None could be called distinguished in the sense in which, I will not say, Hamilton, Jefferson, Marshall, Webster, but J. Q. Adams, Clay, Benton, Calhoun, Seward, Stanton, and Chase, were distinguished men. However, let us take Mr. Blaine and Mr. Cleveland in the election of 1884. One had been Speaker of the House, and was unquestionably a skilful debater in Congress, an effective speaker on a platform, a man socially attractive, never forgetting a face or a service. The other had made a shrewd, upright and courageous Mayor of Buffalo and Governor of New York State. Compare the services rendered to the country by them, or by any other candidate of recent times, with those of Mazzini, Garibaldi, Cavour, and Victor Emmanuel to Italy, of Bismarck and Moltke to Germany, even of Thiers and Gambetta to France in her hour of peril. Yet the enthusiasm shown for Mr. Blaine (who seems to have drawn out the precious fluid at a higher temperature than his rival), the demonstrations made in his honour wherever he appeared, equalled anything done, in their several countries, for these heroes of Italy, Germany, or France. As for England, where two great political leaders, towering far above their fellows, excited during many years the warmest admiration and the bitterest dislike from friends and foes, imagine eight hundred English barristers turning out from the Temple and Lincoln's Inn to walk in slow procession from London Bridge to South Kensington, shouting themselves hoarse for Gladstone or Disraeli!

In attempting an explanation, I will take the bull by the horns, and ask whether the world is right in deeming the Americans a cool and sober people? The American is shrewd and keen, his passion seldom obscures his reason; he keeps his head in moments when a Frenchman, or an Italian, or even a German, would lose it. Yet he is also of an excitable temper, with emotions capable of being quickly and strongly stirred. That there is no contradiction between these qualities appears from the case of the Scotch, who are both more logical and more cautious in affairs than the English, but are also more enthusiastic, more apt to be swept away by a passionate move-

ment.[1] Moreover, the Americans like excitement. They like it for its own sake, and go wherever they can find it. They surrender themselves to the enjoyment of this pleasure the more willingly because it is comparatively rare, and relieves the level tenor of their ordinary life. Add to this the further delight which they find in any form of competition. The passion which in England expresses itself in the popular eagerness over a boat race or a horse race, extends more widely in America to every kind of rivalry and struggle. The presidential election, in which two men are pitted against one another over a four months' course for the great prize of politics, stirs them like any other trial of strength and speed; sets them betting on the issue, disposes them to make efforts for a cause in which their deeper feelings may be little engaged.

These tendencies are intensified by the vast area over which the contest extends, and the enormous multitude that bears a part in it. The American imagination is peculiarly sensitive to the impression of great size. "A big thing" is their habitual phrase of admiration. In Europe, antiquity is what chiefly commands the respect of some minds, novelty what rouses the interest of others. Beyond the Atlantic, the sense of immensity, the sense that the same thought and purpose are animating millions of other men in sympathy with himself, lifts a man out of himself, and sends him into transports of eagerness and zeal about things intrinsically small, but great through the volume of human feeling they have attracted. It is not the profundity of an idea or emotion, but its lateral extension which most quickly touches the American imagination. For one man who can feel the former, a hundred are struck by the latter; and he who describes America must remember that he has always to think first of the masses.

These considerations may help to explain the disproportion that strikes a European between the merits of the presidential candidate and the blazing enthusiasm which he evokes. It is not really given to him as an individual, it is given to the party personified in him, because he bears its banner, and its fervour

[1] Sir Walter Scott remarks of Edinburgh early in the eighteenth century, that its mob was one of the fiercest in Europe. The history of the Covenant from 1638 downwards is full of episodes which indicate how much more excitable is Scotch than English blood.

is due, not even so much to party passion as to the impressionist character of the people, who desire to be excited, desire to demonstrate, desire, as English undergraduates say, "to run with the boats," and cheer the efforts of the rowers. As regards the details of the demonstrations, the parades and receptions, the badges and brass bands and triumphal arches, any one can understand why the masses of the people — those who in Europe would be called the lower middle and working classes — should relish these things, which break the monotony of their lives, and give them a sense of personal participation in a great movement. Even in London, least externally picturesque among European cities, when the working men turn out for a Hyde Park meeting they come marshalled in companies under the banners of their trade unions or other societies, carrying devices, and preceded by music. They make a somewhat scrubby show, for England does not know how to light up the dulness of her skies and streets by colour in costume or variety in design. But the taste for display is there as it is in human nature everywhere. In England, the upper class is shy of joining in any such "functions," even when they have a religious tinge. Its fastidiousness and sense of class dignity are offended. But in America, the sentiment of equality is so pervading that the rich and cultivated do not think of scorning the popular procession; or if some do feel such scorn, they are careful to conceal it. The habit of demonstrating with bands and banners and emblems was formed in days when the upper class was very small, and would not have dreamt of standing aloof from anything which interested the crowd; and now, when the rich and cultivated have grown to be as numerous, and, in most respects, as fastidious as the parallel class in Europe, the habit is too deeply rooted to be shaken. Nobody thinks of sneering. To do as the people do is a tribute to the people's majesty. And the thousand lawyers who shout "James G. Blaine, O-h-i-o," as they march through the October mud of Broadway, have no more sense that they are making themselves ridiculous than the European noble who backs with repeated obeisances out of the presence of his sovereign.