

CHAPTER LXXIX

ORGANS OF PUBLIC OPINION

How does this vague, fluctuating, complex thing we call public opinion — omnipotent yet indeterminate, a sovereign to whose voice every one 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 influential 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. But it is a 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 take their chance of the correctness of the information they receive.

Much harm there is, but possibly as much good. 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 sometimes causes pain to the innocent, it does a great and necessary service in exposing evil-doers, 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 non-political 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. The public has the benefit of hearing everything it can wish, and 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 prejudice rather than to reason. 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 the most notable case of an editor who, by his journalistic talent and great self-confidence, acquired such a personal influence as to make multitudes watch for and follow his deliverances. He was to the later Whig party and the earlier Republican party much what Katkoff was in our own time to the National party in Russia, 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 strike root. The monthly magazines deal less with politics than do the leading English monthlies, but their influence seems to grow with the increasing amount of excellent 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 any one from its party—as, for instance, the revolt of several Republican papers during the election of 1884—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. A short paragraph will state 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 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 journalists altogether 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, not in the inferior capacity of editors and writers, but in the superior independence of the reading public, who regard their paper differently from the English, while finding it no less necessary a part of the mechanism of free government. 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 newspapers of New York, Boston, Phila-

delphia, and Chicago have been one of the most effective battalions.

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. Any one who has made it his business to feel the pulse of the public of his own country 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.

Letters on public questions from their constituents to members of Congress or of State legislatures seem to be less frequent than in England, where politicians find them no contemptible indication of the topics that occupy the mind of the people.

Except during electoral campaigns, public meetings, and especially public political dinners, 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 the protective tariff has become a leading issue, 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 every one who joins in starting it fall into his place, in the practical, business-like turn which the discussions forthwith take. Thus in 1884, the cattlemen of the further 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 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 40 per cent of the population was in 1891 to be found in sixty-two 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 1890, fifty-eight in number, with an aggregate population of 12,348,775, that is, 20 per cent of the total population. The number of persons to the square mile is 498 in England and Wales, only 21 in the United States, excluding Alaska. 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 they do 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 in-

cludes those called in England "arm-chair 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. The country is large, 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 every one 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.

CHAPTER LXXX

NATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS AS MOULDING PUBLIC OPINION

As the public opinion of a people is even more directly than its political institutions the reflection and expression of its character, we may begin the analysis of opinion in America by noting some of those general features of national character which give tone and colour to the people's thoughts and feelings on politics. There are, of course, varieties proper to different classes, and to different parts of the vast territory of the Union; but it is well to consider first such characteristics as belong to the nation as a whole, and afterwards to examine the various classes and districts of the country. And when I speak of the nation, I mean the native Americans. What follows is not applicable to the recent immigrants from Europe, and, of course, even less applicable to the Southern negroes; though both these elements are potent by their votes.

The Americans are a good-natured people, kindly, helpful to one another, disposed to take a charitable view even of wrongdoers. Their anger sometimes flames up, but the fire is soon extinct. Nowhere is cruelty more abhorred. Even a mob lynching a horse thief in the West has consideration for the criminal, and will give him a good drink of whisky before he is strung up. Cruelty to slaves was unusual while slavery lasted, the best proof of which is the quietness of the slaves during the war when all the men and many of the boys of the South were serving in the Confederate armies. As everybody knows, juries are more lenient to offences of all kinds but one, offences against women; than they are anywhere in Europe. The Southern "rebels" were soon forgiven; and though civil wars are proverbially bitter, there have been few struggles in which the combatants did so many little friendly acts for one another, few in which even the vanquished have so quickly buried their