

The Referendum

The referendum means the direct appeal to the electorate on a single definite issue. We have had it in practice here, and there is no need to delay in explaining its working. Last April the Prohibitionists managed to put the country to great trouble and expense in order to have it made clear that the men—especially the men who fought for freedom—would not vote Prohibition. At present Parliament may or may not grant the right of such an appeal, and the Labor Party are, in their programme, advocating the Referendum as part and parcel of the political reforms they deem necessary for proper democratic control. The Referendum has this against it to begin with: it is not viewed with much favor even in democratic countries; and in Switzerland, where it is part of the constitution, it applies only to legislation affecting the constitution which has already passed the Federal Assembly by a specified majority. To pronounce an opinion on the Referendum as urged by the Labor Party here is not possible until we know definitely what they mean. Between the extremes of such mob-government as the Referendum might mean and an appeal to the people under certain well-defined and specified conditions, there is a very wide range and room for very various opinions. What we can do here, however, is to make plain in what sense we cannot support a Referendum, no matter from what party it originates. As we have made clear before now, we look on direct democratic government as absolutely impossible, and we quoted with approval Rousseau's words that such a system is fit only for angels. Men and women are not angels, and for that reason anything like direct government by them is sure to end in disaster. We must be careful not to become, as Renan would say, obsessed by words. When we speak of the sovereignty of the people, we speak very loosely and we say something that we cannot possibly mean. The people have the right to determine their own form of government; they have the right to be governed for their best interests, but it is misleading to speak of them as sovereign. If by Democracy we would understand the sovereignty of the people we have a wrong idea of Democracy. "Sovereignty," says Bronson, "is that which is highest and ultimate; which has not only the physical force to make itself obeyed, but the moral right to command whatever it pleases. The right to command involves the corresponding duty of obedience. What the sovereign commands it is the duty of the subject to do."

"Are the people the highest? Are they ultimate? And are we bound in conscience to obey whatever it may be their good pleasure to ordain? If so, where is individual liberty? If so, the people, taken collectively, are the absolute master of every man taken individually. Every man, as a man, then, is an absolute slave. Whatever the people in their collective capacity may demand of him, he must feel himself bound in conscience to give. No matter how intolerable the burdens imposed, painful and needless the sacrifices required, he cannot refuse obedience without incurring the guilt of disloyalty; and he must submit in quiet, in silence, without even the moral right to feel that he is wronged."

"Now this, in theory at least, is absolutism. Whether it be a democracy, or any other form of government, if it be absolute there is and there can be no individual liberty. . . . Hence absolute despotism."

Obviously we do not want despotism. Democracy aims at destroying despotism, and it would be a sorry state of affairs if it but set up a new form in place of the old. It is not the despotism of kings, or of aristocrats we object to: it is despotism pure and simple—despotism of the people as well as of the tyrant. At the root of the old despotism lay the old shibboleths of the divine right of kings, *l'état c'est moi*, and what not. Beware lest we substitute for them another equally dangerous shibboleth—the sovereignty of the people. Let us not say that under democratic government the people are the State, the State is absolute, and therefore the people may do what they please. That

is exactly the standpoint from which all despotism starts. That is the radical fallacy of governments. Such reasoning would make man as much a slave under Democracy as under a Nero. And when we look for good government we look for it for no abstract thing called "the people," but for Tom, Dick, Harry, and every single man and woman of us all. Not to "the people," but to you and to me the problem comes home; and we are not going to give any Juggernaut the power to ride rough-shod over us, no matter what name it be called. We are not going to be obsessed by words. You and I may become as much slaves under government by the people as we were under the Coalition; and it is for you and for me to see that we do not. So far forth for the principle at stake. Now for the application. Are we prepared to say that a majority of votes ought to be allowed to determine what shall become law, and what shall not, without exception? If we hold this, then we are not giving the right to govern to the people; we are giving it to a majority, however small, and we are empowering that majority to make slaves of the minority. We are disfranchising the minority; we are putting them under the heel of King Mob; we are establishing a despotism ten times worse than the old forms against which we rebelled. And where will the tyranny stop? Will rights of property be respected? Will rights of conscience? Will there be any safeguard for religion, for the home, for the family? No; beyond the variable and fickle will of the multitude there will be none.

Needless to say, we can never lawfully support a Referendum which would give such power to a majority of voters. To do so would be to acknowledge that the man in the street has the right to dethrone God and to abrogate the Natural Law. For instead of the sovereignty of God Almighty it sets up the idol of the sovereignty of the people; and nothing but confusion can be the result thereof. Before we could support a Referendum we should be able to see clearly what it means. If it even meant that legislation must originate with the people, without inquiring what else it meant, we would condemn it. The people are not fit for such a task, precisely because, instead of being angels, they are, as Carlyle said, mostly fools. If, however, it meant that legislation framed and introduced by the representatives of the people ought to be submitted for approval, our objection might be overcome provided that other conditions were present. Such other conditions, in one word, would be that in all cases God's Law and the Law of Nature should be respected: that the rights of religion, the rights of individuals, the rights of families should be sacred and inviolate and for ever above and beyond the power of a Referendum. On such conditions, and on no others, could we support a party which would be likely to carry the Referendum into the sphere of practical politics.

In conclusion, remember that the people are no sovereign: God alone is sovereign; it is the way to slavery to concede sovereign rights to the people, or to any creatures. The true bulwark of freedom is the Law of God and the Natural Law, which safeguard the individual and the family and religion. And because that is so, we warn all against the extreme Laborites who are introducing an anti-Christian propaganda here, and in their very ignorance and blind conceit are the greatest foes Democracy has to-day. We want—more than ever it was wanted in the world before—all the help that religion can give now; and they who swallow the cheap lies of quacks of the McCabe type and spread them as if they were the truth in their press are the real enemies. We want, moreover, instruction as to the true limits of the power of the State, and as to its proper functions. And we want, or we may soon want, men who will stand fast to death if need be rather than give to Caesar the things that are God's.

A pair of cut-glass candlesticks of Waterford make were sold by Messrs. Newton and Co., London, on April 6 for 115 guineas, which is a record.

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