Political Maturity
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Among the peoples of the world some are called ‘politically mature’ and others ‘politically backward’. There is not always agreement as to which people are which, but it is generally accepted that judgments of this kind are not meaningless.

No doubt, these judgments are often moral; and when they are so, we must know the moral preferences of the persons making them before we can understand the judgments. They are not, however, always moral judgments; and, indeed, are seldom purely moral.

The use of such words as ‘backward’ and ‘mature’ implies that what they are applied to, not merely changes, but develops. It may also often be assumed that the later stages of the development are better than the earlier; but the assumption is not implicit in the mere use of the words. They can be morally neutral, and I intend to use them as if they were.

When we say that a thing develops, we may mean no more than that it changes gradually, or we may mean that it changes in a way normal to things of its kind. If we mean only that it changes gradually, we obviously do not imply that, as it changes, it grows mature. Maturation implies a normal order of change; and it can reasonably be doubted whether social institutions change in this way.

Nevertheless, owing to the present ascendancy of European doctrines and the spread of industrialism, certain institutions of European origin are nearly everywhere considered more mature, and often also more desirable, than the others. Belief in progress is strong everywhere, in Asia and Africa as well as in Europe and America; and progress is everywhere understood in much the same way. When Asians and Africans claim equality with Europeans, they do not usually mean that their own institutions, before the Europeans intruded upon them, were no better and no worse than anything to be found in Europe; they mean rather that they are just as capable of what Europe calls progress as the Europeans themselves. Political maturity already has, or at least is acquiring, a universal meaning; and that meaning is capacity for self-government in the European sense.

Political maturity clearly does not mean capacity for self-government, in no matter what sense. All the tribes of Africa managed their own affairs for centuries before Europeans came to govern them; and yet Europeans justify their supremacy in Africa on the ground that the Africans are not yet capable of governing themselves. If this meant no more than that Africans are not able to govern themselves as Europeans think they ought, it would be a purely European opinion, no more interesting than an African opinion that Europeans cannot govern themselves as Africans think they ought. The Europeans have not, however, merely imposed their rule on the Africans; they have also made it impossible for the Africans to regain independence, and with it the ability to govern.
themselves, unless they learn to work European institutions. Africans and Asians, for better or for worse, are, in ever increasing numbers, accepting the European myth of progress. European supremacy, no doubt, rests ultimately on force; but it is a fact not to be denied, and its effects must be accurately described. Since Asians and Africans who most strongly resent European supremacy have to use European methods to get rid of it, they have to accept European institutions and ideas; and since their ability to work those institutions has been questioned on not unreasonable grounds, it is not mere impertinence, but does make sense, to speak of ‘politically backward’ and ‘politically mature’ peoples. And of course, among ‘politically backward’ peoples, it would be necessary to count several of European stock.

To be politically mature, that is, to be capable of self-government, is not merely to be able to maintain one’s independence. Indeed, under modern conditions, complete independence is impossible even to so great a Power as Great Britain. By self-government is meant democracy, which is government responsible to the people. Democracy is understood in this sense by the communists just as much as by us; they may differ with us about what methods make democracy possible, but they never deny that it is responsible government. And they, of course, with even less hesitation than we, believe in progress, and are willing to call some peoples ‘backward’ and others ‘mature’.

I shall not discuss what methods make democracy possible; I shall assume that Liberals are right and Communists wrong where they differ about this matter. I am interested only in trying to elucidate the concept of political maturity; that is to say, in discovering what qualities a people must possess to have a system of government where final authority rests with persons freely chosen by them and ultimately responsible to them.

Let me begin by clearing away certain possible misunderstandings. Democracy is not made possible by the people’s having what is called a ‘will’ that government can give effect to, or by the government’s success in increasing general welfare, or by governmental stability. If it were really necessary, in order to have democracy, that a people should have a ‘will’, in the sense of having to make up their minds about the major issues decided by their government, there just could not be any large-scale democracy. Britain is a democracy, though most people in Britain do not know what policies they want their government to pursue. To say that democracy works better in one country than in another, is not to imply that, where it works better, government comes closer to giving people what they want. Who can know what the people want? Many demands are so vague that it is scarcely possible to know what would satisfy them; whereas demands precise enough for it to be known how they can be satisfied are everywhere made by organized bodies, by pressure groups. But pressure groups exist in undemocratic countries; and even in democratic ones can operate to serve the interests of only a part of the community at the expense of the rest. [No-one, so far as I know, has yet shown that such demands are more nearly met in countries where democracy works well than in countries where it works badly or does not exist.] The same reasons that make it
difficult to say that one government comes closer than another to giving the people what they want also makes it difficult to say that it promotes welfare more effectively.

Nor can we say that democracy works better where democratic governments last longer. Stability is not efficiency, and is not even evidence of popularity. British governments last longer than French ones, not necessarily because they are more popular, but because British parties, unlike French ones, are so organized as to ensure that a government usually holds office from one general election to the next. If efficiency means giving the people as much as possible of what they want at the least cost, there is no evidence that long-lived governments are more efficient than short-lived ones. That British governments are, on the whole, more popular in Britain than French governments in France is probably not due to their greater success in giving the people what they want, but to their being more the sort of governments that the people like to have, more stable, more dignified, and perhaps less corrupt.

No doubt, there is such a thing as efficiency in government, and stability does matter. Where the object of policy is to produce something at the least cost, both the something and the cost being measurable, it is possible to decide that one method of producing it is more efficient than another. In this sense, the administration of justice is more efficient in England and France than it was two hundred years ago. Criminals are more often, and more quickly, apprehended and brought to trial, and civil disputes are more promptly settled. Democracy, perhaps more than other political systems, depends upon governmental efficiency in whatever spheres such efficiency is possible; for democracy, to survive, must be quickly responsive to popular needs. But in politics efficiency is a concept unusually difficult, and often impossible, to apply; and it is, in any case, only a small part of what makes responsible government acceptable and secure. Efficiency is both a narrower and a more difficult concept than political maturity, which is not to be explained in terms of it.

It is sometimes said that political maturity consists in certain moral virtues supposed to make the working of democratic institutions easier – such virtues as a robust sense of justice, tolerance, and good will. No doubt, these virtues exist among ‘politically mature’ peoples, but not more among them than among others. It is my belief that these virtues are more often found among ordinary peasants in the Balkans than among the half-westernized classes that govern Balkan countries. These classes are more intolerant and unjust than their own peasants, on the one hand, and than western governing classes, on the other. They are so, because the attempt to introduce western institutions into primitive countries puts, at least for a while, a special premium on intolerance and injustice.

Nor, to be politically mature, do a people need to understand how the institutions making self-government possible work. That kind of understanding is rare, and the few that have it take little or no active part in politics; for they are usually bookish and sedentary. It has been a commonplace, at least since Montesquieu and Burke, that a people or a ruling class, in order to work institutions successfully (that is to say, in a manner that satisfies them), need not understand how they work. Institutions work when people know what to do on appropriate occasions; and this is much the greater part of what most active
politicians, even in the advanced countries, know about politics. A system of government is like a vast play with innumerable actors but without an author or stage manager. Every actor plays his part, and the play goes well while everyone knows his part. No one, however, needs to know all the parts, not even the most important among them; and no one need see the play as a whole.

That is not to say that it is not useful to have some people in the community who understand how the political system, as a whole, works. For where there are such people, it is easier to adapt institutions to new conditions. Adaptability is an effect of intelligence, and not of high regard for accepted rules. The kind of intelligence that can diagnose social maladies and suggest peaceful but effective remedies is always rare. It is neither possible, nor necessary, that many people should have it. All that is needed is that those who have it should be consulted and listened to.

It also seems to me that political maturity does not consist in a widely diffused ability to grasp what may be called democratic ideas, such as, for instance, that freedom is desirable, and that power ought to be responsible. I doubt whether there are many peoples in the world so simple as not to take the force of Lord Acton’s dictum, that all power corrupts, and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. It is because they feel what Acton felt that illiterate peasants distrust authority as something inevitably hostile to them; they know that they do not control the persons who have authority, and so do not expect justice from them. The poor and illiterate usually have a very powerful feeling for equality, a feeling not aroused by demagogues but by what they see in society around them. They may think it impossible to change the existing order, but they rarely accept it as just. This desire for equality inclines them to like the idea of democracy, when it first comes their way. There is, I think, a sense in which democracy is the most acceptable, because felt to be the most intrinsically just, form of government. That is why the arguments for democracy are so often the simplest; the heavier burden of proof resting on apologists for other kinds of government. The sentiments favourable to democracy are, of course, strengthened by democracy; but they are not part of what constitutes political maturity. They are too simple and too widespread for that. There is a great difference between sentiments favourable to democracy and sentiments favourable to the proper working of the institutions that make democracy possible.

Political maturity, properly so called, seems to me to consist chiefly in these four qualities: high professional standards within the political and administrative class; the ability, about equally diffused among persons drawn from all classes and sections of the community, to use the democratic political vocabulary; a wide variety at every level of society of professional, cultural, and other non-political bodies independent of the state, of all political parties, and of one another; and a high degree of adaptability.

In any large society, where there must be a sharp distinction between those whose profession is to govern and the others, it is necessary, in order that the people should respect and trust authority, that there should be, in every branch of government, high
professional standards and precise rules which are in fact obeyed. A system of government is stable and acceptable when the persons actually involved in it think it important that they should keep all those rules. If, whenever rules are broken, they react strongly against the breaker, they maintain the system even though they do not understand it. Nobody knows all the rules; but every rule is known by some people, so that every breach of an important rule is quickly detected. Where there are high professional standards, the people know that the officials set over them will act consistently, that complaints can be made and will be listened to, that redress is possible. A high regard for discipline goes naturally with a willingness to listen to complaints, even among officials who care little or nothing for democracy. Democracy is probably more weakened by low professional standards among officials than by those officials’ preference for authoritarian government. People used to discipline will accept a strong lead from their lawful superiors even when they do not like them politically. Democracy failed in Germany, not because German officials and judges, brought up under the Empire, simply could not bring themselves to give loyal service to republican and democratic governments, but because those governments were lamentably weak. If there had been in the Reichstag a Churchill or a Clemenceau supported by a firm majority, civil servants, judges and soldiers would probably have done their duty by him as they did by the Kaiser and by Hitler. Such people like being kept busy in the service of a state which appears strong and stable to them. It is a mistake to suppose them temperamentally incapable of serving a democracy.

An undisciplined and corrupt civil service weakens democracy by making it more difficult to formulate a policy and also to carry it out. Party principles are too vague to be called policies; they have to be elaborated into far more detailed proposals if they are to be put into practice. In a democratic country, those proposals must, as far as possible, meet the particular grievances and satisfy the precise demands of the groups and professions most directly affected by them. By helping to formulate policy and by carrying it out, civil servants make it possible to satisfy, not the will of the people (which does not exist), but the countless needs of an enormous variety of groups, trades and professions. No large democracy can be quickly responsive to popular needs unless it is served by officials whose professional standards, moral and intellectual, are high. In Balkan countries many an able and well-intentioned minister has found it impossible to prepare and carry out a programme of reform merely for lack of good subordinates under him.

Ordinary citizens, even in the West, can attach little meaning to the proposals put to them by political parties at general elections. This is inevitable, not as a consequence of human stupidity, but because political promises have to be vague if they are to attract large numbers of people whose needs and opinions vary enormously. People do not lose faith in democracy because, at general elections, clear and precise promises are made to them, and then afterwards are not kept. They lose faith in it because nothing or too little that is effective is done to remedy their grievances. People are often vague or mistaken about what ought to be done for them, but they soon lose confidence in politicians who do not, or cannot, help them. In Eastern Europe the peasants have been acutely dissatisfied for many years; and yet have not really known what they wanted done for them. If there had
been a civil service intelligent and public-spirited enough to study peasant grievances carefully and report on them realistically, it might have been possible to find remedies. The peasants would then have felt that something was being done for them. Civil servants are, of course, not expected to initiate great reforms; but without their intelligent cooperation it is scarcely possible, especially in a primitive country, to discover just what problems have to be solved, let alone solve them.

It is also important, if self-government is to be possible, that the ordinary language of politics should be widely diffused. I do not mean the language used by students of politics but by active politicians. There should be politically articulate persons in every class and among all groups in society. To know how to use this language is not necessarily to know how political institutions work, for that is theoretical and not practical knowledge. But it does enable a man to take an active part in politics. It is the language in which public business is done, though it is not the language in which how that business is done can be adequately described. Whoever can use it can do business on more or less equal terms with the others. A hundred years ago the English language of politics was competently used, with few exceptions, only by the wealthy and the educated; today it is used, not less competently, by tens of thousands of people who still feel they belong to the working class. This political language need not be (and in fact never is) competently used by the general public; but in a democracy, the persons who can so use it must be drawn from all sections of the community. The politically articulate must not, in virtue of this competence, form a class separate from the rest of society; they must be politicians negotiating with, or competing against, one another according to conventions that it is dangerous for them to set aside. They must be rivals, and therefore watchful critics of one another’s behaviour.

In Serbia before 1914, as in Yugoslavia after 1918, the special ability of politicians to use this language served to cut them off from the people. A man might be a peasant by origin, but once he became politically articulate, he moved out of the class of his origin into the class of westernized persons supposed to be capable of discussing social problems and taking an active part in politics. Indeed, this ability, which set the persons having it apart from the rest of the people, was perhaps the most important of social distinctions. It belonged, not to men who were powerful as the responsible spokesmen of rival groups and classes, but to men who themselves constituted the most powerful class in society precisely because they had this ability. Where the language of practical politics, the language in which public business is done, is competently used by spokesmen for many classes and groups, and where this competence does not create a new class more powerful than the old ones, it does not long remain the exclusive possession of the politically active. It comes to be understood, to a considerable extent, by all classes; not as the politicians understand it, but at least well enough to enable electors to make a genuine choice between the parties soliciting their votes. The choice is genuine because the electors have a rough idea what the parties stand for, what classes or groups they are most likely to favour, and what problems they will attempt to solve.

To be politically mature, a people must also have a wide variety of independent bodies acting for all important groups in society. It is within these bodies that there emerge the
precise demands that politicians cannot afford to ignore. The people have no will in the sense supposed by old-fashioned radicals; they have only needs and aspirations, which must be defined before they can themselves know them for what they are. These needs are many and conflicting, and cannot all be satisfied. In a large democracy, there must be, at every level of government, frequent negotiations between politicians and civil servants, on the one hand, and these bodies, on the other. These negotiations serve two purposes: they make known to the government the specific needs and wishes of every section of the community, and they also make it clear to these sections that there are limits to what government can do for them. The very process of negotiation helps people to discover what exactly they want, and also teaches them to accommodate their wishes to other people’s. The more exactly people know what they want, the more can be done for them; and the easier also it is to persuade them, by bringing to their notice the equally specific and well-argued claims of others, that not everything can be done as they would wish. People are made moderate, not so much by understanding the complexity of the problems that face their governments, as by having it borne in upon them that others have as good claims upon that government as they have themselves. It is by seeing, in particular cases, the limits of what can be done for them that they acquire a sense of the possible; and in this way, too, their confidence in government is strengthened.

It has been truly said that the leaders of every organized body acquire ambitions and interests different from those of their supporters. Leaders always speak for themselves as well as for their supporters, and the very qualities that make them leaders always to some extent set them apart from the people they lead. The larger an organization the more this happens. But large organizations are necessary to a large democracy. They are, however, also dangerous to democracy, unless they are surrounded by many smaller ones, that watch, criticize, and support them. They then depend, not merely on the rather inarticulate and ill-informed ordinary supporter, but also on the support of persons who themselves are the leaders of other and smaller bodies, persons who can, should the need arise, take their support from one large organization to another, or even set about forming a new one. Large organizations, and this is particularly true of political parties, are dangerous to democracy unless they have to please many small ones.

Why is that the British workman who votes for the Labour Party or the business man who votes for the Conservatives is more satisfied, than, say, the Balkan villager who voted for a Peasant Party before the last war? To some extent, of course, because he has a better idea of his party, and of how it differs from its rivals. He is politically more knowledgeable than the peasant. But that goes only some way towards explaining why he feels greater confidence in his party. His knowledge still falls far short of what is needed to enable him to pass a rational judgment on most questions of policy. Though one glass has ten drops of water in it and another only one, they are both, for most practical purposes, equally empty.

What gives the British voter greater confidence in his party is the conviction, based on experience, that it is the party’s interest to do something for him. Between him and it, there are usually several bodies interested in the welfare of persons like himself. He has several supports, several interpreters of his needs; and these interpreters are not all in one
league together. Some speak for him in matters local or professional enough for him to understand, while others are engaged in controversies that are beyond him; but his trust in them is well founded. They are caught up in a complex system that makes it difficult for them to serve themselves without also serving him. It pays them to be moderate and effective, to get as much as they can for him and his like when they negotiate, without behaving in ways that make future negotiations difficult. These qualities are not the virtues ordinarily called tolerance and justice. They are virtues proper to skilful negotiators. It is my experience that few people are more tolerant than peasants, and that the inarticulate often have a very nice sense of justice. They are, however, incapable of making their needs felt in any but the most simple society.

People who often do business together tend to treat one another moderately. They do so in the Balkan village and the Oriental market place as well as on Capitol Hill and in Westminster Palace. Lack of moderation is to a considerable extent an effect of lack of communication. It is an effect of frustration, of not knowing what you want, of envy, and of the feeling that you are being neglected. In an old-fashioned despotism, ordinary people fear their rulers and expect very little good from them; they accept the peace offered to them and ask for no more. When western ideas are first introduced among them, they soon come to expect very much more from their rulers, but they still have no clear idea of what they want or how to get it. They have grievances and are discontented, but they are still dumb and unorganized. It is then much easier to exploit than to serve them. They are neither passive nor politically mature. It is easier to direct their hatred against the government than discover their needs and the means of satisfying them. The people can never speak for themselves; but they can have spokesmen they can trust, even when they do not fully understand them. They will not, however, have good reason to trust them unless those spokesmen are the leaders of many independent bodies, each pushing the interest of a separate group in society. The people cannot really know what they want, until they are looked after, thought for, and spoken for. In the jargon of democracy, they cannot have a will until the means of giving effect to it exist. But those who claim to speak for the people must be so related to the people and to one another that it really is their interest to speak for the people and not only for themselves.

Adaptability, the fourth quality that makes up political maturity, needs the least comment. In modern society, it means not so much knowing what to do in an unforeseen situation, as knowing who to go to for advice. It means setting a high value on expert knowledge, on wide knowledge, and on impartiality. In politically backward societies, where politicians are often corrupt and political rivalries bitter, the advice of experts and impartial persons is not often sought, or if sought, is seldom taken. Such advice is unlikely to be useful to private ambition or to parties waging a bitter struggle for power. It is one of the saddest things about the world that what makes for enthusiasm lessens adaptability. It is too often the people who are willing to force through the greatest changes who find it least easy to profit from impartial advice. Where, however, such advice is taken seriously, politicians and civil servants soon learn their limitations. They become more moderate and better informed. The politicians, of course, still play the game of politics zealously, trying to score off one another on every likely occasion; but they also learn to stand a little aside from that game, and not to take it or themselves too
seriously. They learn to be flamboyant without being immoderate. Adaptability is less the virtue of the ordinary citizen than of the politician and civil servant.

I do not say that political maturity consists only of the four qualities I have discussed, but merely that they are its principal ingredients. Now, it may be objected that the Germans had these qualities, and yet fell easy victims to Hitler. I do not deny it, but then I do not regard the Germans as being politically immature. I used to think they were, but that was before I had tried to discover what political maturity is. The Germans seem to me more intolerant and unjust than the British; but then they also seem more intolerant and unjust in the twentieth century than they were in the eighteenth. On the other hand, I cannot see that the British are more tolerant and just than, say, the Montenegrins were in King Nicholas’s time, before the process called ‘westernization’ had properly begun. There can be real tolerance and a deep concern for justice among primitive peoples quite incapable of working democratic institutions.

I am inclined to believe that democracy failed in Germany owing much more to other causes than to anything that can fairly be described as political immaturity. Such causes might have destroyed a much older democracy than Weimar Germany, but they were particularly dangerous to a young one. Defeat in total war, the humiliation of a proud ruling class, the ruin through inflation of a large part of the middle class, and lastly, unemployment on a scale never known before: these shocks proved too much for a still very young democracy. They produced passions and resentments dangerous to democracy because demagogues could so easily exploit them. German democracy had not in 1932 lasted long enough to inspire the loyalties that every system of government must inspire if it is to be strong.

No doubt, Germany was politically less mature than older democracies. Democracy strengthens the qualities that make democracy possible. A Britain exposed to the same shocks as Weimar Germany might never have given power to a Hitler. Yet the failure of democracy in Germany was due less to the qualities that make democracy possible than to the presence of other causes destructive of it, causes liable to operate more strongly in advanced than in backward countries. It failed for reasons different from those that caused it to fail in, say, the Balkans; and it is the latter reasons which, because they are negative, are more properly called political immaturity.