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PRAGMATISM IN POLITICS

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An English writer has recently pointed out that popular elections may go through the same development as did the jury system which, in the beginning, merely registered the opinions of twelve men, until it gradually became obvious that their opinions must be formed under fair procedure; then the process itself was so developed and the interviewing of witnesses so controlled that these processes finally became the really essential features of the trial.

America has long been concerned that the registration of the voter's opinion at election should be fairly done, and to this end has instituted the Australian ballot system and many another device, but has as yet done little to develop a careful method by which the voters might form a sound judgment.

The published accounts of the various efforts to manufacture opinion which preceded the party conventions this year and of the enormous ex-
penditure of money which these efforts entailed have made the public cautious, and as a result, all the parties are perforce driven to the pragmatic method, if one chooses to call it so. Politicians are ready, as never before, to conduct the campaign upon educational lines, to drop that oversimplification of current problems to which a campaign always tends and to stem the flow of political eloquence by a painstaking presentation of facts.

The educational value of the current Presidential campaign is most important to the American voter, irrespective of the party which claims his vote. A new method is being evolved freed from the old shibboleths and fitted to our industrial development.

The American voter is not content with the eighteenth century formulae of liberty and equality, high-flown as they are, for they do not apply to the situation. Liberty has come to be a guarantee of equal opportunity to play our parts well in primary relations, and the elemental processes of birth, growth, nutrition, death are the great levellers that remind us of the essential equality of human life. No talk of liberty or equality "goes" that does not reckon with these.

It is possible that this campaign will not only bring the United States in line with the great European countries which have made social standards for labor the subject of governmental action, but that it will also bring American politics so long an anachronism in spirit, into line with our development in other directions. Certainly the wisest philosopher of America contended to the day of his death that even "Philosophy is not sufficient unto itself but plungs eagerly into reality, into science, into life, there to be refreshed and rejuvenated."

This pragmatic element in the present campaign has inevitably challenged those institutions which base their activity upon a careful study of social conditions: they too, like the voter, have been driven to realities, are made to test the validity of their phrases.

Institutions, perhaps more easily than individuals, tend to grow self-conscious. It is not difficult for an institution to think so much of its future usefulness as to forget the cause it is serving and for which it is founded, and this may happen quite aside from any question of alienating subscribers. We all forget that "influence," whether of persons or of institutions, ceases to be of real value when it is consciously cherished as a possession, that it must be a "way-side flower", as our old copy-books used to say about happiness. One can think of no greater travesty on worship than a whole churchful of people who had all gone there for the sake of their example to someone else, nor could there have been a more dreary comment on the spirit of philanthropy than if the Chicago social workers last winter should have allowed the most highly developed juvenile court in the world to go to pieces under their very eyes because they were afraid of injuring their personal influence by interfering in the situation which was one of partisan politics.

In fact, an institution may easily become detached from the life of its community and fall into a position similar to that occupied by many women in relation to their own family circles. I know women who resent the moral idleness to which they have been relegated through the very kindness and respect of their grown-up children. They are, of course, expected to give advice and to advocate only the noblest and highest principles, but because they live so remote from reality, some of them gradually distrust their own conclusions and frankly accept the moral standards, which their sons, flushed with action, bring to them from the "marts of trade" and the exciting "political arenas"; others openly abandon their safe haven of peace and certitude. It is true that they can no longer claim to be a fixed point of righteousness in the boiling sea of perplexing issues, but they are glad to be free from the harassing doubt that possibly the righteousness they were advocating was not righteousness at all. Their so-called inferior position is at least tested by reality and constantly clarified in discussion.

In like manner, an institution which stands in the minds of the community for "good works" is in danger of substituting the unreal activities of being good to people for the sterner task of ascertaining their genuine needs and of ministering to them in all humility of spirit.

It is impossible to consider the complicated conditions of modern life with its proposed measures of legal control and social amelioration from the a priori point of view. Perhaps the gravest danger which besets a well-established institution is a subtle self-righteousness, a tendency to substitute the smaller good for the larger good; to consider the philanthropist as superior to the politician. Adequate measures for social amelioration can only be carried out with the consent of all the people and the wisdom of such plans are best discussed in relation to the realization of opinion, to use John Morley's fine phrase. Certainly we have all learned that new ideas can never gain wide acceptance unless the persons who hold them confess them openly and give them an honest and effective adherence. When the ideas and measures we have long been advocating become part of a political campaign, which is after all but an intensified method of propaganda, would we not be the victims of a curious self-consciousness if we failed to follow them there?