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TO MY FELLOW-DISCIPLES AT SARATOGA SPRINGS.¹

THE present is not an inopportune time to send a greeting from the Old World to your Conference at Saratoga. We have just gone through a General Election. We have been ascertaining the mind of the people. After more than sixty years of incessant change our methods of discovering the national will were believed to be pretty nearly perfect. The United Kingdom is roughly divided into districts of approximately equal population, each electing one Member to the House of Commons; every male householder is an elector; and the voting is given under a sacred secret ballot so that our serfs and hirelings may promise one way and vote another without fear of detection and punishment at the hands of a brutal aristocracy, whether feudal or industrial. The picture is perhaps a little ideal, as such pictures are apt to be. There are lingering discrepancies in population among the districts, but these variations would not interest you; and, indeed, from your distance they would appear quite unimportant. The householder must have lived in his house twelve months before he is put on the register, which is thought severe on persons of migratory habits. Substantially, however, our First Chamber is chosen after the most approved democratic pattern. Here you may see the representative organism of a nation discharging its functions with a promptitude, a celerity and an exactness that may excite the envy of the world. You set your machine in motion, and out comes at once the express image of the people's brain; and it is born full-grown and full armed to fulfil forthwith the well-measured purpose of the nation. We have none of the checks and hindrances which your slower Conscript Fathers devised when they framed the Constitution of the United States. And what has been the result? Six weeks ago we had a House of Commons with a Home Rule majority (any other name will do as well) bravely backing up the Government that possessed its confidence. To-day that Govern-

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ment has gone, another has taken its place, and the constituencies have elected a House of Commons with an enormous majority to support the new Administration. Before this reaches you the new Parliament and the new Government will have met, exchanged greetings, and settled down in their courses. This is Triumphant Democracy indeed—quick, firm, certain; and if the change has been overwhelming, a Great Nation is surely entitled to make Great Changes. Everybody is astonished, and those who love whirlwinds rejoice. It is true that some two or three (these units are always to the fore) tell us they knew long since exactly what was going to happen; but the most of us frankly confess our surprise. It was foreseen that there would be a shifting of the balance in the House of Commons. It was not foreseen that the overturn would be so multitudinous. For some days the prophets were left staggering, especially those of the defeated party. Then they presented to the public the unedifying spectacle of friends falling out and berating one another as the causes of the catastrophe. It was not long however, before

¹A letter to a Conference of friends and advocates of Proportional Representation, held under the auspices of the Proportional Representation Society of New York, and the American Proportional Representation League, at Saratoga Springs, 27th August, 1895, and following days.

another vein of discussion was opened which we and our friends may watch with singular satisfaction. If nothing else has been done during the last ten years, this much has been gained: that the least dull among our public instructors—the elect ones not absolutely besotted with use and wont—have learnt the trick of looking behind the achieved result of the balance of the elected to see how the balance of the electors went. They jump over the House to count the voters up and down the land. It is not so long since that this was a rare enquiry. It is getting to be a commonplace. Almost every newspaper writer understands it. Some of our Parliamentary leaders occasionally recognize it. So it came to pass that after the first shock some of the defeated pulled themselves together to count the masses. And it must be owned our General Election has been a wonderful quickening of intelligence in this direction. The enquiry, once started, has been pursued with eagerness. Such a “totting” up of figures. Such rows and cross-rows of comparison. Analysis, synthesis, hypothesis—all called in aid. And such beaming satisfaction at the result. The surprising discovery has been made that the balance of parties in the House of Commons is a caricature of the balance of parties among the voters of the Kingdom. In the House of Commons the victorious party number more than 60 per cent. of the whole; but the political arithmeticians tell us (and their figures have not been seriously questioned) the same party cannot be credited with more than 51 per cent. of the electorate. We, Proportional Representationists, are not astonished. The fact does not come as a revelation to us, for, indeed, we have realized stranger things; but I hope my

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friends in Conference in Saratoga will not be too much disposed to smile at the importance I attach to the setting forth and popular learning of this object lesson here. I do so relish a good stroke of education. We cannot always get a blackboard on which the figures can be drawn so broadly and so clearly. We cannot always get a united class of journalists and politicians with eyes fastened on that board, following and learning learning the lesson. The class may not go very far, but everything learnt is something gained, and I think it worth while to note this insular progress.

Our friends have learnt that a big majority in the House of Commons may mean only a small majority among the people; and for the present they go no further. The use they make of their discovery is to encourage one another not to be downhearted. The waves are nothing compared with the bulk of the ocean; and if the whirlwind continues to whirl, what is against us to-day may be with us tomorrow. This seems the limit of the moral drawn by the men of addition. On the other hand, their critics say this exaggeration of popular majorities is useful and even necessary. It is not new, and it is so good if it did not happen it would have to be created. If you want a strong Government, it must be strongly supported, and—here the reasoning begins to waver a bit—a Government is strongly supported when it has a mob of Members behind it depending, for their power on the smallest majority of the people. Both sides are thus pleased. Those who have been defeated are content for the moment with the proof that their defeat has been exaggerated. Those that have won rejoice in the greatness of their power. This diffused satisfaction is interesting, but what will the next lesson of experience be? Perhaps it will show that our most approved system can with about equal facility work out not only an exaggeration of majorities, but a contradiction of them. In spite of equal districts, vote by ballot, and all the rest of it, you may find that

the majority of elected members are of one party and the majority of elected voters are against them. But this is droll? A nation directly consulted by *plebiscite* choosing, one path, and the same nation consulted through the election of representatives refusing that path—is it possible? The thing is not merely possible: it is bound to happen now and then., indeed it has happened.² It is believed to have happened here in former elections, though the process has been so disguised that the truth has not been recognized and confessed. Nay, this very election which has just been completed affords ample proof [24]

of this strange possibility. Not every district was fought. Some were abandoned to the predominant party. But the districts that were fought make up together a sufficiently large community, and what was the experience of their contests? The party that numbered an aggregate of 1,800,000 voters as against 1,775,000 given to their opponents secured only 202 seats against no less than 279 captured by the minority.³ It may be presumed that the balance of voters in uncontested seats somehow corrected this falsification, but the bare fact of experience is enough to demonstrate the utter untrustworthiness of our electoral methods. I believe you could cite many examples of similar miscarriages in the elections of your State Legislatures. Sometimes they are put down to gerrymandering, but gerrymandering is not necessary. It may make misrepresentation certain, but such misrepresentation is possible with the most honest allotment of districts. Your President, again, has more than once been invested with his extended power though the popular vote was against him; and, although this result has been facilitated by the disparity of the representation of States in the Electoral College (New York with a small popular majority being able to outweigh many small States with a much larger aggregate popular majority), the falsification of the national vote does not depend upon this disparity. You have been able to survive all such mischances, for your national life has been hitherto apart and above your political machinery, but a few years ago there was the same miscarriage in a Swiss Canton—the balance of the people was one way, the balance of their elected representatives another—and there was a splutter of revolution; some lives were lost; whereupon the system was changed, Proportional Representation was adopted, and the new principle has spread fast from Canton to Canton, promising soon to be accepted universally by the Swiss Democracy. What a pity it is that some one man must have a knock on the head before other men will open their eyes. Meanwhile I muse as to what my calculating friends would say if our next General Election gave us a House of Commons in opposition to the balance of the popular vote. If these good people while winning in the country were left in a minority in the House, they would scarcely be content to comfort one another with good words. As for those deeper-seeing folk who hive such excellent reasons for finding strength in an exaggeration of the popular vote, would they invent some new and equally good reason for approving a result in contradiction of that vote? I dare say they would. The ingenuity of

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²If in the election of a Chamber of 500 Members 200 of one party are returned with an average majority of 1,000 a piece, and 300 of the opposite party with an average majority of 500, the majority of 300 to 200 in the Chamber is in a minority of 50,000 in the country.

³This startling, fact was first brought out by Sir John Lubbock, and it is not yet commonly understood. Lord Rosebery's last speech shows that he is quite ignorant of it.

apologists is beyond belief. It seems, though one might not have thought it, much less trouble to invent some topsy-turvy argument in favour of things as they are than to brace up our intellectual energies to consider the simplest proposal of chance. Human nature may be different with you, but I have great confidence in its fertility of subterfuges in this Older World. And with good reason. I shiver myself at the thought of being thrust naked out into the cold. What a jolly awakening there will be some few years hence, when the inevitable argument of experience will show us a nation contradicting itself through the voices of its chosen representatives! The stupidest politician will sit up, rubbing his eyes. After all, facts are facts, and although we may quote one to another with a chuckle the words of the Wise Statesman, "Lies—damned lies—and statistics," still there are some easy figures the simplest must understand, and the astutest cannot wriggle out of. So we may be led to the serious consideration of change by the evolution of materials of conviction which those who run may reed, though some who read may wish to run away from them. And when the means of cure are found to be easy and practicable, the end ought to be near. In view of this forecast I hesitate, even in addressing my fellow-believers at Saratoga, to add another word. And yet the truth must be told. We may confess to one another that in our judgment the worst vice of the common electoral system is not displayed when it is shown that it constantly distorts and often contradicts the very purpose of its existence. Let these freshly-awakened innocents "chortle" over their discovery if they will. They are still in shallow waters. We may blunder on in spite of repeated miscalculations of the popular will. More penetrating and pernicious is the influence our ill-devised machinery has upon the character of our national life. It eats in and into it. It degrades candidates and electors alike. It does its worst to reduce to sterility of influence many of the best of the component elements of the people. The individuals survive, but with their political activity dead or dying, no opportunities of life and growth being afforded them. Finally it presents as an embodiment of the nation an assembly or assemblies into which none can enter who have not been clipped, and pared, and trimmed, and stretched out of natural shape and likeness to slip along the grooves of supply. A free press, free pulpits, and a free people outside help to correct what would otherwise become intolerable but press, pulpits and people, free as they are, work and live in strict limits of relation to the machinery established among them. "The world revolves on its axis subject to the Constitution of the United States," and the most Radical newspaper man in London, if such there be, never

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lets his imagination range out of hearing of the Clock Tower. But, oh, King Charles's head! how persuade the average politician of the truth of these sayings? Glimpses do not often visit him of a life different from his own. He is contented with his environment. Whatever nature may have intended at first, he has passed through years of preparation, for the atmosphere in which he lives. It would be rude to tell him that he has no sense of defect because he is habituated to the lower level; although his complacency would be probably proof against any such home-truth. Here and there we may perhaps find a Brutus who has schooled himself to be the dullard of party, before whose mind receding visions of emancipation occasionally flit; but this is rare. We may not hope for an instant acknowledgement of the justice of criticism of common political life, though we may look to the callow young to receive an impression against which

the callous old are proof. Still how stands the fact? It matters not whether Congress or Parliament, the House of Representatives or the House of Commons be under consideration. The young man who is moved in any way to contemplate an entry into public life, whose creed is not in absolute inheritance from his fathers, learns first of all to understand that there are two great political organizations, with one of which he must associate himself, learning and echoing its catch-words, accepting its leadership, and steeping himself in the belief that in it are wisdom and truth while the other party is void of both. It is not everyone whose ductile mind takes him through this training, and a goodly number of up-growing men of not the worst promise for the future have to step aside. The man who has sufficient pliancy and power of self-persuasion to reach a second stage is perhaps accepted as a candidate. He and someone else are pitted against one another for the representation of a particular district. The mass of the electors are already divided into two camps, and the party creeds have been so adjusted that there shall be a fair chance of victory through winning the unattached minority that hangs loose outside both armies. What an education follows! It is really a fine comedy, though the players rarely know it. I am but a clumsy performer myself, and have to confess to incurable defects of training, so that I sometimes wonder I have not been hissed off the stage; still I have seen the performance through more than once or twice, and know something about it. Such tender and delicate adjustments and readjustments of convictions to keep the party balance sure! Such abundance of spoonmeat on the one hand, and such careful economy on the other of truths that may prove too strong for weak digestions! Such avowals of readiness to consider seriously any opinion, however obviously absurd, broached by a possible supporter! Such prompt denunciations of all the devices of an irrecon-

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cilable opponent! But I forbear. It is an education, and an education which has to be maintained and sedulously developed if the aspirant succeeds in being chosen as one of the voices of the national life. Is it surprising that many an elector should be brought to say "A plague on both your candidates," and that the ultimate question should often be, which is the less unsatisfactory of the two? As for life within a Legislature,—who can tell how warped and bent and twisted, and accommodated to the exigencies of party struggle become the faculties of belief? Strong and courageous natures know it, and remain strong and courageous in spite of knowledge and practice; but the pliancy of man is beyond admiration, and is nowhere better seen than under the schooling of Parliament.

All this will be said to be very much overstrained. At best it is a gross exaggeration, and it may perhaps be more accurately described as a caricature from which remembrance of the original has departed. It is true—it has been already admitted—that the picture will not be universally recognized; but it has been suggested that the failure of recognition lies rather in the degeneracy of the faculty of seeing than in the misrepresentation of the vision to be seen. It may be also confessed that life often survives all the perversities of training. We cannot absolutely nullify the prodigality of nature, try as hard as we may. In spite of most careful management, untractable growths survive in the most provoking way, and intrude themselves into fields believed to be kept free from their presence. And sometimes it happens that the poor party managers have to accommodate themselves to the genius they curse. Thanks for the indestructible gift of

life! But if it be not all true; if all that we have to confess is that we deliberately uphold political methods, which being invented to tell us what the people think and wish, cannot be trusted to declare the force or even the direction of their desires; which designed to cherish and sustain in healthful life all the political activities up-growing year by year for the service of man exclude many, sterilize more, and, but for a bounty that cannot be wholly repressed, would leave none to survive but the least generous, the least vital, the least beneficent; and if side by side with this revelation of forms that fail in their primary, purpose, and are yet operative to starve and choke the most wholesome and precious of the vitalities vouchsafed us, we were offered a way of living which should secure a trusty reflex of the national will in its intensity and its aims; which should give us a real presentment of the national life drawing up and incorporating within itself all the influences that work together to make the nation;—why it is not singular that those who have received this vision, those

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whose eyes are opened to see what is and what may be, should be moved, as you are moved to-day, to call their friends and neighbours together to rejoice in the prize of their discovery. Neighbours and friends will not come all at once, but some are straggling in, others are thinking of enquiring what these babblers say, though the wondrous wise and wary ones are very reluctant to enter upon lines of thought that may lead them to troublesome conclusions. I cannot blame them, though all history laughs at their hesitation. In the end the troublesome paths will be trod, and I hope your Conference will let not a few brave and adventurous spirits to enter upon them.

LEONARD COURTNEY.

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See also

<http://www.york.ac.uk/depts/maths/histstat/lies.htm>