ON THE PRESENT ATTITUDE OF POLITICAL PARTIES

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By

EDWARD AKROYD, F.S.A.

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PREFACE.

BEFORE the close of the last Parliament, and during its concluding Session, I began to jot down the thoughts and observations embodied in this little work. I was then under the impression that they might be available for the impending General Election, which was not expected to take place until the autumn of the present year. The sudden and unexpected Dissolution in January last, and the results of the Elections, have served to verify my prognostications, and to bring into a clearer light the attitude of Political Parties.

E. A.

BANK FIELD,
HALIFAX,
March, 1874.

ON

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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION.

In the House of Commons, as in the country at large, political parties are classed under two divisions, "Liberal" and "Conservative." The term "Liberal" may be taken for granted to mean liberal in principle, and to indicate a love of individual liberty or freedom. "Conservative" has reference to the conservation of our ancient national institutions, and is viewed in this light by the party.

Notwithstanding this broad and general division, there are every variety and shade of opinion in both ranks. Individual minds vary; and as in nature there are no two leaves upon any single tree exactly alike, so in mankind, no separate individuals think precisely the same on all subjects. Any permanent formation of party must allow of individual variety in accordance with natural laws; whilst the first principle of association is to submit individual difference of opinion to the furtherance of the broad general principles on which the Association or Party is based. Amongst the Conservatives there prevails a stricter discipline, and a greater readiness to sacrifice divergence of thought for the sake of unity; whilst amongst the Liberals there is less cohesion, and a more stubborn adherence to individual crotchets, and to subdivisions of party.

"Whig" and "Tory" were the original terms for designating the same two divisions of political parties; and both date from the latter portion of the seventeenth century.

Under the leadership of Sir Robert Peel, the more acceptable term of "Conservative" was substituted for that of "Tory;" and soon afterwards the word "Liberal" replaced that of "Whig," whilst it furthermore served to cloak the divergence between "Whig" and "Radical."

In the *Constitutional History of England since the Accession of George the Third* 1760 *to* 1860, by Sir Thomas Erskine May, C.B., is given a masterly sketch of the history and influence of party in Parliamentary government. Speaking broadly he says—"The parties in which Englishmen have associated, at different times, and under various names, have represented cardinal principles of government,—authority on the one side,—popular rights and privileges on the other. The former principle, pressed to extremes, would tend to absolutism,—the latter, to a republic: but, controlled within proper limits, they are both necessary for the safe working of a balanced constitution. When parties have lost sight of these principles, in pursuit of objects less worthy, they have degenerated into factions."[1] After the Reform Act of 1832 there naturally occurred a change in the aspect of parties, and the "Radicals" came to the surface as Radical Reformers. In the words of Sir T. Erskine May, "the two first years after the Reform Act formed the most glorious period in the annals of the Whig party. . . . . While they were still fighting the battle of reform, all sections of reformers united to support them. Their differences were sunk in that great contest. But when the first enthusiasm of victory was over, they displayed themselves in stronger relief than ever. The alliance of the Whigs with democracy could not be permanent, and, for the first time, democracy was now represented in Parliament. The *Radical reformers*, or *Radicals*, long known as an active party in the country, had at length gained a footing in the House of Commons, where they had about fifty representatives.[2]

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[1] *Constitutional History of England since the Accession of George the Third* 1760 *to* 1860. Longman & Co., 1861. In two volumes. Vol. II., Chapter VIII., page 2.

[2] *Ibid.* 59, 60.

. . . . The second administration of Lord Melbourne [in 1835] was again exclusively Whig, with the single exception of Mr. Poulett Thomson, who, holding opinions somewhat *more advanced*, was supposed to represent the Radical party in the Cabinet. The Whigs and Radicals were as far asunder as ever: but their differences were veiled under the comprehensive title of the 'Liberal party,' which served at once to contrast them with the Conservatives, and to unite under one standard, the forces of Lord Melbourne, the English Radicals, and the Irish followers of Mr. O'Connell."[3]

That word *Liberal* has done good service to the party by keeping together discordant elements which do not readily fuse into one compact body; but the old differences are cropping up again, aggravated, unfortunately, by religious dissensions. Of late years, the term "Moderate Liberal" has been used instead of the historic "Whig;" in contradistinction to that of "Advanced Liberal," or "Radical." Already this moderate section of the Liberal party has exercised a controlling influence at several single elections, and has materially affected the issue of the General Election. The influence of moderate counsels upon the people of England is certainly due to the serious alarm entertained by Parliamentary constituencies at the revolutionary sentiments uttered by violent politicians, and at the crop of wild and visionary projects introduced annually to the House of Commons, in the shape of Bills, which, happily, are cut down before they can become law.

Besides these two main divisions of the Liberal Party, which, under the modern designation of Moderate and Advanced, represent the sections of Whig and Radical, there are numerous other sub-divisions, which threaten the total disruption of the party. It is not surprising, that, in the Liberal ranks, where "Liberty" is the watchword, and where the utmost freedom of opinion and of combination is recognised as a fundamental principle, there should be greater sub-division of party than amongst the Conservatives,

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[3] *Ibid.* 67.