

**THE ARISSTOCRACY  
AND THE PEOPLE, NO I,  
ACTIVE CONSERVATISM**

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The aristocracy and the people, No I, Active Conservatism by Robert M. Heron

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## ACTIVE CONSERVATISM.

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Changes in the Social and Political Aspect of the Country since 1832—National Character of Conservatism in England—Social and Political Principles not identical—Increased Action of the House of Commons—Necessity for the Declaration of a Defined Policy by the Conservative Party—How the Aristocratic Element might be strengthened—Position of Younger Children—Two National Impulses to be satisfied, those springing from the Activity and Intelligence of the Middle Classes and those which arise out of the Necessities of Labour—Christianity in its relations with Commerce and Colonization—Necessity for more efficient Imperial Organization—Legislation should proceed upon an Anticipation of future Political Exigencies.

THE singular absence of all political excitement which has followed the late brief agitation for Reform, will not be considered as furnishing any indication of an indifference in the public mind to popular changes. The special causes which induce men to forget or lay aside their favourite theories will pass away, and we may look forward to the day when Parliament will be again invited to enter on the question of the reconstruction of its own body by the establishment of a new basis of representation. It is not likely that a Liberal Ministry will so far forget their traditions as to forestall agitation; but rather following the custom and precedent of the party, wait until they are impelled by pressure to do something. Conservatives, however, are surrounded by no such exigencies. They can raise themselves to a point where they may take a calmer and juster view of the ultimate consequences of the proposed measure before the period of discussion arrives. The question is one which, above all others, must suggest the most serious thoughts to the minds

of Conservatives: in no conceivable task of legislation is greater foresight and wisdom to be expected, and in none could the effects of a political error or a false judgment of the requirements of the time be more strikingly felt at a future day; for upon the character and constitution of the House of Commons, which in these days substantially possesses the power of modifying everything, depend not only the guarantees of free government, but the future bias of the national policy on all Imperial questions. If a Ministry should so far mistake the signs of the times as to act upon a temporary pressure instead of calming down public feeling, and conclude that the country was dissatisfied with the present basis of representation because not sufficiently democratic, what future sources of collision might be generated by such a judgment; how light a word might convert Parliament from being the medium for promoting public business into an arena where a war of classes would be the perpetual subject of debate?

In estimating the possible results of further lowering the standard of representation (the basis of which has always strictly been the possession of a respectable status and a defined amount of property), we are naturally compelled to note the great change which has taken place in the political relations of the aristocracy and the people during the last thirty years.

#### I.

The era of the Reform Bill of 1832 was virtually an era of revolution; from that period the oligarchical or aristocratic character of the Constitution may be said to have ceased in form. Practically, however, the action of the House of Lords did not expire in a day: the old

system had been too long in action ; but it is needless to say that the political influence and organization exercised by the upper House over the lower has gradually declined from that time. Any one who watches the action of the House of Commons now, would hardly believe that the passions and aspirations of that assembly were only thirty years ago swayed and moulded by the influence of the upper House. The steady progress of the House of Commons in power since that period and the increase of its functions have been exactly concurrent with the growth of the democratic principle without, the influence of the Press, the extension of education, the supremacy of the trading principle, the increased taste for luxury and expense in the middle classes, the retirement of the higher orders from the antagonism and exactions of political life, and the decline of the calmer social enjoyments. The desire of personal elevation and the fever of competition absorb and harass the public mind. These are only so many features of that great social revolution which men vaguely foretold thirty years ago as the inevitable result of the political change which annulled the restraining influence of the House of Lords, and its traditional authority as a check upon the growth of the democratic element in the Constitution. During these thirty years, therefore, it is not surprising that a greater number of measures of a sweeping character, all tending to democratic results, have been brought forward and passed through both Houses than during the whole range of their joint legislation previously. Moreover the House of Commons has virtually changed its functions from a deliberative assembly to one possessing an executive character, as evidenced in the promptitude of its action and pressure upon the Ministry of the day. Its impatient scrutiny over public business in every

department has undoubtedly led to a dictation, frequently of the most impulsive nature, which was not considered *etiquette* thirty years ago, and which a Minister, instead of meeting with a show of good-natured submission, would have repelled indignantly as an obstruction to the due and calm execution of official duty.

But the House of Commons, after all, has only kept pace with the changes of opinion which have been in operation in society. Political and social influences have relatively reacted on each other and stimulated the movement of the same ideas, legislation assisting public opinion, and *vice versa*. And so our manners and habits have responded more to the influence of political excitement than to any other influence. In short, a complete revolution has taken place in the social intercourse of the various classes of the community. We see keener, and more antagonistic principles of action pervade even the same orders in their mutual dealings. As the Daily Press has grown in power and influence, the authority of the Pulpit has declined; as the higher dignitaries of the Church relax the old ideas of duty and discipline, the subordinate members assert a new and eccentric power of religious interpretation of many hues. We see the most sacred and enduring of all contracts degraded, by a parliamentary fiat, to the standard of mere temporary convenience. We mark each day the decline of self-respect and high personal character among the members of some of our leading professions, and we miss even in the House of Commons itself the old sense of dignity and mutual forbearance and courtesy. These, and many more unnecessary to mention, are unmistakable evidences of an important change of convictions, and the progress of a leveling principle in the social state which has far exceeded



the ratio of progress in the political forms of equality yet to be achieved. If they are not essentially democratic features due to an ascertained political cause, they are at least evidences of a relaxation of manners which announce dangers of a nature substantially as serious and menacing as revolution itself.

But we are consoled with the assurance that in the midst of these social manifestations a vast material progress has been effected, and is in increasing operation. If men spent more time formerly in sociable and friendly intercourse, and less in the struggle for existence and even life, they can now contemplate the marvels of Science and hymn her praise. The working man is consoled for his isolation from the sympathy of the other orders, by the reflection that cheap literature and high art are brought home to his door. If he works harder and longer hours, he may qualify himself and aspire, for political and administrative employments are no longer a monopoly. By such specious paradoxes is the mind of the working man rendered giddy, and his inferior powers encouraged in the race of hopeless competition.

And yet in the midst of these results there must be some misgivings; for although our national progress is stupendous in its aggregate, it is still relatively inferior to the ratio exhibited by many other countries, such as France, Prussia, and even Spain, since the era of Free Trade. But then it will be answered that in any case the glory belongs to England, in making such relaxation of her old exclusive principles of commerce as tended to set free and stimulate the industry of neighbouring nations, and that her mission in these days is rather to be instructress than the monopolist; and so if we enjoy fewer of the calmer and more humane pleasures which spring from the union and sym-

pathy of classes, we have enlarged our principles so as to embrace the idea of *humanity* rather than that of *home*. If our progress is relatively less than that of our neighbours, let us hopefully conclude that sooner or later the exercise of these principles will give us greater command over the material gratifications of life, the boon returning like bread cast upon the waters. Hitherto foreign nations have met these generous advances in the spirit of their necessities and the contact of a poor neighbour with a rich one has had its proverbial result, in being of important benefit to the former.

It will not be denied that the increasing abstraction of the aristocracy from public business since the era of 1832, when they really dictated the policy of the country, has necessarily led to the prevalence of a new set of political ideas and views regarding National Progress. Indeed, we may trace to the policy of the upper classes in this country, the origin and success of all our plans of ascendancy and the habits of discipline necessary to such a result. Of late, the middle orders have been the sole creators, and they have been embarrassed by no factious opposition from the class which has parted with their former power; but that the country has gained in dignity and elevation by these habits of sensitive retirement—by this exaggerated modesty on the part of the aristocracy in these days, cannot be maintained. It has tended to encourage the growth of one exclusive idea—the exaltation of the trading principle. Society is taught to view material pleasures as the pearl of all price, enjoyment has its spring in selfishness rather than in sympathy, and every year the national policy grows more narrow and individual in its conception by the public men who profess to be the leaders and apostles of their time.

## II.

The question then arises : Is the Conservative principle in these days a reality in the convictions of those who interest themselves in general politics, or even a latent element in the social creed of Englishmen which is capable of being evoked, as formerly, under the auspices of the higher orders ? With them the idea has emanated. It has been one of frequent and careful inculcation, and the great Conservative reaction against the principles of the French Revolution of 1789, affords the most memorable example of its pervading influence over the minds of all classes, who, it is needless to say, entered heart and soul into the views and sentiment of the aristocracy, just as twenty years before, with less wisdom, their sympathies were found in unison with them against the Crown in favour of American Independence.

Since the era of Free Trade it has been the fashion to consider Conservatism as in a state of transition towards more liberal and progressive views. It is asserted that Conservatives can give no explicit account of their opinions in relation to each other,—that they are not only without any defined policy, but that the spirit of public opinion and the bias of the age is against them. In short, the opponents of Conservatism characterize it in no better terms than they do Legitimacy on the Continent, forgetting that we still possess the old machinery and formal guarantees of constitutional government. But looking at the aspect of our social state rather than to the dogmas of professional politicians, is there any term which more aptly expresses the favourite bias of the English people, their peculiar sympathies, and above all their time-honoured traditions, than the term Conservatism ?