

**UNFORESEEN
TENDENCIES
OF DEMOCRACY**

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Unforeseen tendencies of democracy by Edwin Lawrence Godkin

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EDWIN LAWRENCE GODKIN

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1871

Unforeseen Tendencies of Democracy

BY

EDWIN LAWRENCE GODKIN

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INTRODUCTION

I HAVE endeavored in the following pages, not to describe democracy, — something which has been done by abler hands than mine, — but to describe some of the departures it has made from the ways which its earlier promoters expected it to follow. It has done a great many things which they never thought it would do, and has left undone a great many things which they thought it would do. Not nearly all the deductions from the principle of equality have been correct. The growth of democracy has dissipated a good many fears about the “mob ;” but on the other hand it has failed to realize a good many expectations about its conduct of government. Nearly all the philosophers, from Tocqueville down, and especially the English Radicals of the earlier part of the century, would be surprised by some of its developments. No democratic state comes anywhere near their ideal. Unexpected desires and prejudices have revealed themselves.

Democracies have discovered new ways of doing things, and have discarded many old ones. More particularly they have not shown that desire to employ leading men in the management of their affairs which they were expected to show. In fact, that wish of the people to control their own business, which tormented the Old World for so many centuries, has been fully gratified, but the people are not managing them in the ways that were expected. Nearly all the recent writers on democracy, however, have assumed an inability on its part to correct mistakes, which the facts do not seem to me to warrant. Had it no such ability, the future of the world would indeed be pretty dismal. On the other hand, the error of its friends in defending it lies, it seems to me, in underestimating the length of time it takes a democratic community to find out that it is going wrong and to acknowledge it. It must be admitted, even by its warmest admirers, that democracy is not very teachable by philosophers and jurists. Experience counts with it for less than it used to count for, under the old aristocratic governments, but the reason seems to be that the experience of one class is seldom of much use to another. Each

is apt to think it will do better by doing differently. Every democracy, too, is weighted by the fact that its new agents are rarely men familiar with public affairs, or with human trials in matters of government. Those of its advisers who are familiar with such things are apt to be hostile or distrustful, and are therefore not listened to with confidence or attention. It is, in fact, launched on a chartless sea, and most of its legislation hitherto has been mere groping.

The first danger it has encountered is the enormously increased facility for money-making which the modern world has supplied, and the inevitably resulting corruption. I cannot help doubting whether any régime would have withstood this. The power of getting money easily, debauched every court and aristocracy in the Old World, even when getting money easily meant mere rapine. The demoralization this is producing now, even among the scions of old houses, is one of the wonders of our time. Neither philosophy nor religion seems to offer much resistance to it. It is breaking down, not simply the old political, but the old social usages and standards. The aristocratic contempt for money as compared with station and honor, of which we

used to hear so much, has completely vanished. The thirst for gold seems to be felt now by all classes equally, while the number of those among whom the gold has to be divided, is greatly increased.

Another disadvantage with which democracy has to contend, is being called on, almost suddenly, to govern the large masses of population called cities, without any experience, either of their special wants or of the means of satisfying them.

Our civilization has, as has been said, become urban within the present generation, almost without our knowing it. Democracy has therefore been suddenly called on to solve problems by universal suffrage which an oligarchy of the most select kind has never had to face. Its failures, therefore, have been serious and numerous, and there does not seem much chance of its doing better without experience; experience is a master from whose chastening rod none can escape. To suppose it will not learn through mishaps and miscarriages would be to despair of the human race, for it is from suffering or failure that we have got most of the good

things in civilization. The great, perhaps the only, mistake optimists appear to make is, as I have said, the mistake of thinking there are short cuts to political happiness.

E. L. G.