

ON THE ARDUOUSNESS OF BEING A CITIZEN IN A FREE COUNTRY.

BY EZRA B. CROOKS.

THE late national political campaign revealed a humble-minded willingness on the nation's part to acknowledge past lapses, to confess present sins and urgent needs, and to face future menaces that was rather new to our proud and touchy American spirit. All the parties professed themselves reform parties, and instead of "pointing with pride," each anxiously sought to convince the electors that it was best fitted to make the needed changes, the significant thing being that it was assumed on all hands that changes were necessary, and many changes at that.

But I am convinced that the most threatening aspect of our political life was only lightly or not at all touched upon. I mean a menace so all-pervasive that it lacked the dramatic quality that would get it into the speeches.

This "menace" is the enormous difficulty of casting an approximately intelligent vote. To be sure, the citizen of a free country, to be a good citizen, must willingly count on devoting a good deal of time to governing, but the question remains as to whether our governmental situation is not now so complicated that the average intelligent citizen is unable, even with care, to reach a judgment of any value on most national issues, on many state issues and even on some municipal issues.

To begin with, the vast majority of the citizens have really only one source of information as to the facts involved—the newspapers. Fortunately, some of our daily journals have a high sense of honor in their news service, even when their editorials are utterly partisan, but unfortunately, other journals have such honor not at all or only in degrees. During a trip last summer I had a striking illustration of how a considerable section of the country may be excluded prac-

tically from intelligent participation in the discussion of the issues of a national election. The two counties of two states I visited are normally supplied by the papers of one of our large cities, and in these papers, with the exception of a small evening paper that circulates but little in the country, one of the three principal parties before the people was alternately ignored and systematically misrepresented. Few of these voters saw any fairer papers and few indeed of them read any of the important magazines, i. e., few in proportion. It is difficult to see how intelligent votes should be cast in the light of such misinformation, as. e. g., on the question of governmental supervision of interstate corporations, even if the voter had the interest and intelligence to form an opinion.

For my part, I read campaign literature of four parties on this subject as well as numerous papers diurnal, weekly, and mensal, and was able to arrive at a pretty definite opinion as to what will be necessary in this most difficult question of the relation of business and government. However, this judgment rested on more general theories, economic and governmental, which I had worked out before this campaign. Now comes currency reform and here I feel no confidence at all in either my private or public judgment, whether bolstered or unbolstered by print.

The point is *here*, of course, that it appears that more is being demanded of us as citizens than we are able to perform. We can mark and put in the box certain sheets of paper, but is that voting?

Our problems of government have become so many and so complicated that only a few men can be so placed as to get hold of enough of the facts to be able to decide. In part this is the price of becoming big. But far more this complexity has been forced upon us by advancing civilization. Success is measured now by ability to cooperate and not by individual initiative and effort. If we are to hold our own in this new world of cooperative and scientific effort, new in China and in Europe as well as in America, then we must find a way to cooperate too. This means big business of every kind, monster industrial corporations, huge aggregations of capital, continent-embracing railway systems, massive labor-organizations, on the one hand, and on the other hand, highly trained technical and administrative specialists, continuous commissions with broad powers and resources to watch and guard major special interests, such as interstate commerce, manufacturies, standard of living and efficiency of the working population, educational opportunity, food supply, moral health.

All these and many more such problems we will have to attack

cooperatively, i. e., under the guise of governmental activities. Such commissions of special investigation as we have had so far have just about revealed to us the nether depths beneath the pits of waste, inefficiency and ignorance into which we had looked before. Seven special congressional committees are now at work on seven problems of national interest, and the "Money Trust Committee" alone is furnishing more food for reflection than most of us voters can digest.

And after all, most of us have several things to do besides voting. If we are family men there are the family duties and the living to make in any case and then some of us have special interests of our own which take time. Just when, during the next few months, I am to find time to read up on the currency question is not easy now to see. And economics is not my line any way.

So these are some of the troubles that beset the earnest voter, but not all of his troubles, for not a few of his responsibilities are local. I live in the second city of Cook County, Illinois. Within eight months the following demands have been made here upon voters: an important campaign and primaries for state legislators "jack-pot" proof; agitation for presidential direct primaries; these primaries under strong excitement; two history-making national party conventions in the town next door where we transact our business; the national campaign and election, and surely this needs no comment; and to end up the year a strong fight for a filtration plant and pure water. I see I have forgotten the aldermanic and school elections and also a special referendum on a new building for our township high school. I feel almost guiltily certain that I have forgotten one or more elections, and then there are the first four months of the year of which I have no clear memory.

Does one marvel that it becomes just about necessary to knock down and drag to the polls the commuter who is making the daily rush for his train? Many escape however. Of America's twenty-one million enfranchised citizens, almost one-third failed to exercise their privilege in the last presidential election. The voting business is getting pretty strenuous and fatigue distress signals are appearing in the electorate.

Nothing has yet been said about the length of the ballot, as of New York's famous fourteen foot ballot as against Chicago's mere nine feet. But the proportion of feet of ballot to population is in our favor. Think of our fifty-foot ballot when we get those ten million inhabitants.

I do not believe that the average Chicago or Cook County voter has ever heard of one name in ten on his ballot. Is there not some-

thing innately absurd in this kind of voting, especially for officials whose duties are chiefly technical? This aforementioned average American has a wholesome aversion to making a fool of himself too often.

It is evident enough that we, the electorate are being called upon to settle questions about which we know nothing now, and in the nature of the case can find out but little even about the facts, much less their application. But the moral is not that voting is a failure and that we should quit it. True there is no heavenly vision, even in a free government, to illuminate electors as to facts that can only be reached by expert investigation, or as to the scientific soundness of the principles involved in a proposed reform, or yet as to the technique necessary to carry into practice a needed measure, but we common voting fellows are good judges of results. We even claim that we are the best judges of whether the thing worked well or not, and, in the final analysis, the only people entitled to a deciding opinion, for we are the consumers of the results. Or to change the figure, we are the dog on which the thing is tried and we know how it feels.

So what mere citizens require is more efficient public servants and these better protected by civil service rules as long as they can and will do the job. Colonel Goethals and his many first-class assistants is an example of what I mean. The past rivers and harbors "acts" is an example of what I do not mean. We can judge whether or not the canal is being dug and we can even have a valuable opinion on the wisdom of spending hundreds of thousands of dollars year after year on making a river navigable up which we never see any boats going.

But we need more than individually efficient public servants. There must be permanent commissions each of which knows about some great public interest, what has been done, is being done and to be done or left undone as the case may demand. These will be the efficient and permanent guardians of the public interests. If they do not guard them the voting public should have a way of reaching such recreant servants either directly through the recall or indirectly through bringing pressure to bear on the appointive power.

Here again we ordinary voters will not know how to reach an anthracite coal mining and railroad trust, but we are capable of making out that the continuous rise in price of that commodity, a dollar a ton on the excuse of paying the miners a few cents more per ton, is a hardship. And without much of a strain, we could demand of our Commission to know the why of this hardship and

that fair dealing be given us, i. e., we could if we had such a commission. And when the price of eggs suddenly jumps ten cents per dozen, when there are millions of dozens of them deteriorating in cold storage, we are shrewd enough to smell rottenness.

Yes, it will be an important relief to the overworked voter not to require him to do what he can't do by voting, in fact what voting is unable to effect at all. Our government is the vastest and most diversified business corporation that we know anything about. We voters can't spend wisely and justly one billion dollars a year by making pencil marks on certain slips of paper. It is not the best plan to vote so often.

Not only will it lighten our electoral burdens not to have to vote so often, but it would vastly ease the elector's spirit to have a justifiable confidence that his voting makes more difference. And really has our voting made much difference? In this last national campaign, I felt more confidence that my vote bore a meaning than I ever had, except of course in the case of that first presidential vote. But voting must make more difference else there will be yet more cynicism concerning it than at present.

Voting must be more direct. Under our present highly overdone representative system we vote for somebody to elect or to appoint somebody else to do everything. And if the thing is not done the best we can do about it is to refuse to vote again for the first somebody. But he may be elected just the same on some other irrelevant ground, e. g., by a general party landslide. Or perhaps he got all he wanted the first time. We must have a way of getting at the recalcitrant "representative" while he is yet in office, and we must also be able to get a measure to which we have fully made up our minds, despite all our "representatives" severally and combined.

It may sound a bit illogical to ask for new powers in the franchise in order to relieve the voter. But I believe it is the only way in which the voting method of government can be saved. If the voters had this power of recall and initiative it would but seldom have to be used. Our servants the representatives would find new ways to interpret our wills. Especially would this be true if the recall extended to their acts.

Inasmuch as we vote for some judges, are not at least these elective judges our representatives? All the other judges are appointed by our elected representatives and so indirectly are our creatures, too. Now, if our voting really does impart to a man a divine attribute, a species of infallibility or irreversibility, by making him a judge, then we may well shrink from the responsibility of exer-

cising so divine a power of creative activity. What good reason can there be for the possibility of an act of the legislative department plus a decision of the judicial department being able to fasten irrevocably an evil upon the body politic? When voting can strike at such a condition as this then voting will be no burden for me, and cheerfully will I give up my lunch on that day of voting in order to exercise the right.

No way can be devised in a free government, however, by which the conscientious elector can evade a serious contribution in thought and in time to his political duties. It will mean financial loss often enough.

Only one solution can be had for this problem of electoral responsibility and that is for the voter to find a vital and considerable part of his life interest in public affairs. That is, he is to include politics, in its broad interpretation, in his program. And politics is interesting, nothing can be more so, on off years and all. Since I happened to find this out the question now is to prevent this interest from invading the time that justly belongs to my trade and to social life. Here is drama, comedy and farce, credulity and cynicism, benevolence and diabolism, pathos and tragedy, in one word—life, life, pretty raw at times, but always real, and, taken as a whole, touched with the promise of the ideal. How any live man, even just a little alive, can keep out of it is more than I can see. When you take it in this way the burdens of the electorate do not constitute a hardship.

Two things have been meant by all this: first, that voting must be made simpler, less frequent and more efficacious; and, second, that the voter ought to accept voting, not as a side issue, but as an integral part of his normal life interests.