

GOVERNMENT IN NEW ZEALAND

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By Leicester Webb. Department of
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combe and Tombs.

How It Works And How It Doesn't

EVERY three years, with luck, every sane and moderately well-behaved New Zealander over the age of 21 years is permitted by the State to cast a vote which helps to decide the destiny of his country for the next three years. That vote is a penny put in a slot machine. The voter pops it in. Anxiously he watches while the levers swing over and the gears whirr. Expectantly he waits for the stick of chocolate.

This is Democracy. So long as the machine produces the stock of chocolate, so long is the owner of the penny satisfied with the machine. But he knows how it works no more than the farmer understands the accounting machine that checks his produce out into the market, no more than the accountant understands the working of a header in the fields.

No one, in fact, knows precisely how Democracy works. Not even Leicester Webb, who has just written a book about its working in New Zealand and has spent some years studying it, reporting it, criticising it in its workings.

"Democracy is a Myth"

It is its formlessness, perhaps, which makes Democracy work so surprisingly well. It is not a long tabulation of clauses in a constitution; it is not even a close analysis in a first-class book. It is a myth—an invulnerable blanket against the sharp points of logic with which men so often and so unfortunately persecute themselves, as they are doing now.

And it is this formlessness which makes Mr. Webb's Centennial Survey, "Government in New Zealand," the most stimulating of the series so far published. The others have been mainly factual. No one could dispute J. C. Beaglehole's assertion that Tasman followed the Maoris in the discovery of New Zealand; W. G. McClymont's that Butler first saw Whitcombe Pass; Helen Simpson's that the first women endured hardships and the last established institutes and sewing guilds. But no one can say "this is how Democracy works" and get away with it.

So Mr. Webb's book has the first great virtue that it is contentious. It also has the virtue that it provides a complete basis for other people's arguments as well as his own. He has therefore done his job as it should have been done, and no higher praise could be given.

Comparison with Britain

From his first page to his last he throws out material for argument. He has no sooner rounded off his first paragraph, for example, than he says that New Zealand's political system is almost as different from the British as it is from the American and French systems. He does not accept this as an example of a more individual thinking in the young country. Far from it. He ascribes it to pressure of social need and says, in fact, that the leaders of the first systematic colonising efforts deliberately set them-

selves to transfer to New Zealand cross-sections of English society.

To explain the rise of a new system of Government against continual pro-English bias, Mr. Webb skips through the development of a formal constitution in New Zealand and dives into the complex problems of party political Government. It is here that he finds his clue to the seeming mystery of a people still flagrantly subservient to the Government of Great Britain but at the same time evolving their own political system.

Class and Party Conflict

He seems to say that the political system in New Zealand differs from the political systems elsewhere in that it "has never developed that stability in party politics which in England is the product of long-established and vital political traditions and in America of powerful, efficient, and wealthy party organisations." And: "the class conflict, as expressed in party conflict, is restrained and complicated by a variety of factors." One of these is the "uncertainty of large and electorally important sections of the communities as to where their class interest lies."

In these circumstances, within an economic framework which distributes income as evenly "as it is likely to be in a capitalist society," party loyalties are not on the whole so strong as personal economic loyalties.

The voter is more interested in the stick of chocolate than in the brand of machine that spills it out.

The Labour Party

To this generalisation there are exceptions. Mr. Webb acknowledges that the Labour Party is built up as "the political structure of trade unionism." This indicates some freedom from mercenary loyalties among Labour's supporters, but it does not mean that the predominant "swinging" vote of New Zealand does not still go wherever its economic position seems to indicate that most benefit may lie.

On this basis, Mr. Webb assumes that party conflict "takes place within the conventions of the existing politico-economic system" and "... the spectators know well enough that the contestants, for all their bawling and thumping, are not fighting it out to the death."

There is an implicit understanding that a Labour Government will not set about wholesale expropriation of private enterprise, and that a government of the

right, far from attempting a return to *laissez-faire* capitalism, will merely slow down the extension of the powers of the State.

Loyalty is Economic

Out of these arguments Mr. Webb makes other interesting theories. Democracy in Great Britain, he suggests, has been built up in such a way that the legislature acts as a check on the conduct of an existing system of Government. Certain institutions were finally established, with Parliament as their guardian. But in New Zealand the basic precedents of Government had already been established. The Government has come to be regarded by the voter, not as an institution to preserve him from worse things, but as a body elected

by him to give him better things. Here the economic loyalty is again the clue. The voter pays tribute not so much to political theories and conflicts, as to the plain facts of £ s, and d. On the one hand he cries out against any attempt by the State to assume his profitable responsibilities, and on the other hand he demands of the State that it should relieve him in time of distress.

Powers of the Executive

One of the most interesting features of Mr. Webb's study of Parliament is his tabulation of the age grouping and occupational status of Members. In this there is no argument. His chapter on the executive also states a fact which is normally obscured in the clouds of political theory. "The world-wide tendency for the powers of the executive to increase at the expense of the legislature and the judiciary has been particularly marked in New Zealand, mainly because the content of politics in New Zealand is almost exclusively economic. As a source of legislation, the Cabinet is now almost as important as Parliament." Mr. Webb talks of Ministers of the Crown running in the House "the gauntlet of sceptical and relentless criticism," but his earlier survey of the educational qualifications of Members more or less cancels that out.

Public Service Under Fire

Of the Public Service he has much to say, all of it interesting, nearly all of it contentious. He describes the various stages of its evolution through selection of public servants by preferment and promotion by seniority. He records the

recent tendency to go outside the Service to recruit executive officers for the rapidly widening activities of Government, and as a reply to this notes that the Service is endeavouring to strengthen itself by advanced training in public administration and the institution of internal efficiency tests.

At the moment it is not certain whether current and prospective changes within the existing organisation of the Public Service will overcome the almost insoluble difficulty of running an essentially ungainly machine. It is here that all the perfections of social theory fall down—on the human element. The more human beings you have in one organisation the more blundering there will be. There is still no evidence to show that the political theories of the nation's executive have been, are, or ever will be efficiently expressed through the machinery of State in efficient administration.

Last and Most Interesting

On these chapters, and on three that follow them on Departments of State, Control of State Spending, and Local Government, Mr. Webb bases his arguments for the last and most interesting chapter of all: "New Zealand Democracy." His most important conclusion about the working of Government must surely be this one:

The genius of the New Zealander expresses itself, not in a capacity for solving difficult problems of sociology or economics, but in a capacity for carrying through projects requiring organising ability and technical skill and resource. When the task involves excursions into abstract thought Government in New Zealand is frequently at a loss." Why this should be Mr. Webb does not attempt to make clear, but the fact that it is so explains why politicians are elected if they can organise money in the right direction and defeated if they merely promise to organise brains; why the machinery of social legislation is perfected as fast as it is introduced, while the spirit of it is as speedily lost; why the Public Service either ignores everything but the three R's or loses itself in theories about public administration while it forgets the simplest precepts of human sociology; and why no one in New Zealand is ever in favour of any Government but the one that might have been.

If more value is needed in an already invaluable book, readers can turn to an appendix setting out fully the complexity of state departments, a reading list, and an index.

Whether we agree with Mr. Webb, or disagree, we should thank him for reminding us that there are other things to think about in the science of government than the price of butterfat or the income-tax scale.

—S.B.