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## COUNTRY PARLIAMENT

By H. E. BATES

AMONG THE OLD chestnuts which still go off with a dusty pop—mothers-in-law, babies' napkins, the husband taking off his shoes at the foot of the stairs, income-tax, sergeant-majors, and the rest—the English parish council has a fairly honourable place. On the long chain of democracy, which we re-furbish with such vigour every twenty years or so, it hangs like a clumsy and antiquated bead which no one remembers to shine. Its proceedings have been so often burlesqued, its chairmen so often guyed, that probably many people think of it, when they think of it at all, in terms of music-hall or comic broadcast: as something so dead and ineffectual in reality that it must be made fun of to be kept alive at all. Yet this same chestnut is part of English democracy. It is the country parliament. As long as its functions continue the English rural labourer can get up on his feet and spout his piece and elect his local government. The moment it becomes extinct these privileges, and perhaps the rural labourer with them, become extinct also.

When I recently took the chair at the meeting of my Parish Council it was something like my twentieth meeting, and my fifth or sixth of the war. For two hours we discussed what I suppose were trivialities and what I suspect the rest of the village concluded would be trivialities, since only one person out of a population of two hundred and fifty was present. Reflecting on this, I began to wonder if the functions of the English parish council system are really becoming archaic and in consequence comic, or if this was just another sample of

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country indifference, of the kind stigmatized with "the more you do for them the more you may".

It is true that country people are notoriously indifferent to the system by which they are governed; but those who govern them are often indifferent also, though with a kind of indifference that is sometimes a betrayal of public trust. For instance, if I look back over the records of the Parish Council of my own village I find again and again this entry: "At the meeting of the Parish Council held on such and such a date (date often wrong) no business was conducted, there being an insufficient number of councillors present." On the occasion when business was conducted it is apparent that it was often of a footling kind; the dreary minutes are dead, written with clumsy and colourless formality. Payments of expenses are noted and approved; but long later it becomes apparent that they too are muddled. The clerk makes payments out of his own pocket, content to reimburse himself at some future time. No one bothers. It is pretty clear that for years no one cared, that many people were shoved into office and remained there, bored, ineffectual, inarticulate and perhaps not even knowing why they were there until they were shoved out again.

This is one period. Take another: the chairman is now a man of both ideas and background, though unfortunately both are mistaken. He is a genial, conservative, slightly pompous man who wishes to infuse these qualities, together with some town ideas of improvement and pep, into the government of the village; he is a townsman who, knowing nothing of country values, wishes to see himself in the position of country squire. He has read somewhere, perhaps, that



village folk need a lead, that they never do anything unless shown a glowing outside example. So his method of government is that of the feudal squire: I want it done my way and it will be done. Unfortunately it is getting on towards the middle of the twentieth century, the feudal squire is a victim, like the church, of the great revolution of 1914-1918, and even in tiny villages there is bound to be someone who, sooner or later, resents the rule of autocracy. So he is ousted, and I confess I do my part in ousting him. But not before he has cut down a hundred magnificent trees, which include beautiful specimens of acacia and African oak, and has landed the village with a financial debt, together with a debt of bitterness, which can never be redeemed.

So the system of muddled indifference and the system of vigorous but mistaken autocracy have both been tried. The only difference in their respective failures is that the one has negative and erasible results and that the other has results of a positive indelible stupidity. Of the two I prefer the rule of indifference.

Yet both are wrong. Villages cannot, or at least should not, be run this way: by a combination of carelessness and somnolent indifference to what can be and ought to be done, or a combination of grandiose ideas and a serious misconception of everything fundamental to rural life. Yet they are run like this in England to-day; and they are run too on the equally questionable combinations of bigotry and jealousy, pecksniffing and back-biting, bureaucratic jiggery-pokery, and plain, dumb slackness of heart.

When I found myself voted chairman of my own Parish Council, with a council composed entirely of working men (one gardener, one estate-hand, two skilled

workers), I knew that, as far as experience went, I had no qualifications. Yet I felt I could not go wrong if I acted with scrupulous fairness, with at least an attempt at judicial balance in disputes, and without bias; or if I gave every man not only the right to speak but to speak plainly; or if I encouraged rather than damped down intelligence, individuality, and the inquisitive ferreting that the country mind loves; or if I created a feeling of informality, equality, and no-nonsense; above all if I did not impose my own ideas, individuality, and prejudices rigidly and with superiority, thus creating the very thing, class-consciousness, I hate most in contact with my fellow-men.

And now, after four years, I think this has worked well. Knowing the folly of trying to force the country mind towards decision and change, I have rarely attempted to force a proposal or a scheme. Nothing has ever been cut and dried. I was, and am, quite disinterested; I did not, and still do not, care any more for the rights of one man's property than another. As a council we were fortunate in two things: nobody on the council was employed by the chairman; nor was the clerk to be got at. So fear of outspokenness was ruled out; fear of consequences was ruled out. The clerk himself was an outsider, a man trained in Rural District affairs, and in many ways excellent. Taking him back to the town in my car after the meetings I could sometimes reflect sadly with him on the question of country bigotry, vindictiveness, slackness, suspicion, ingratitude, the too prevalent creed of always wanting something out of something and if possible for nothing.

Yet it was not really these things which bothered us. What bothered us was the long legacy of past councils:



the years of inefficiency, unattended meetings, indifference as to whether trees were cut down or common land privately appropriated. For three years we fought through an amazing jungle of legalities, dishonest dealing, and weary argument in order to retrieve for public ownership a five-acre common that had somehow passed into private hands. Past councils had watched such shady dealing with open eyes. We disentangled the bungled affairs of centuries-old charities, the documents for which had often been lost. We fought against the closing of the village school, against rats, cases of bad sanitation, the long-windedness of Rural Councils. We fought against the deep-cruised, impervious, class-ridden autocracy of clerics, whose contribution to village life could be measured only by the visiting bicycle (on fine afternoons and to the right people), the doffed hat, and the frog-cold smile. We fought for council-houses, safer corners, bus shelters, cleaner ditches and streets. We fought whenever we could and for whatever seemed worth fighting for.

And with what result? To hear again and again the rural parrot-cry: "The Parish Council never does anything."

Yet in twenty odd meetings, when better housing conditions, important principles of common rights and child education were being discussed, the average public attendance has been less than one per meeting.

And who attended? The landowners, the farmers, the men who are the economic life of the area? Not once. The parson? No. The maiden ladies to whom property, legal rights, and the petty privacy of the garden fence are parts of a jealously defended ritual? Never.

Yet these are the people of education, social background, economic independence, spare time. These are the people who should care. Is the country in which they have chosen to live and do business of no account to them at all? A lady says "I love law; I love stocks and shares", and in that brief remark one sees reflected a whole life of selfish interests, a fanatical regard for profit and property, a deeply insulated indifference to all life except her own. A landowner worth a quarter of a million pounds shudders dying in an icy bedroom and barks at the nurse "Bah! who wants a fire? I can't afford such luxuries!" A rich country business man tells with delight of swindling an antique dealer out of a table worth £50 more than is paid. A woman of independent means employs a gardener who is called up for the army: he leaves on Thursday. The occasion to him is one of upheaval, sadness, apprehension, a certain bitterness at leaving wife and baby. But to the employer? An occasion only to argue whether or not she shall pay the week's full wage (two pounds) or dock for a day and a half. In such lives one is confronted with a selfishness beside which the Himalayas are a range of molehills.

To all of these people, as to the section of the community known as "the villagers", the Parish Council is a common heritage. It is a tiny working fragment of the democratic machine. It is a symbol of free social expression, small but significant; it is a part of the larger privilege by which democratic man elects or ejects his government.

Has this any possible interest or significance for the outside world? I fancy it has. Sometimes the examination of the small thing may lead to a better understanding



of the larger. In the present attitude of indifference towards the English parish council, both of electors and elected, there exists a great danger. It is a danger that must always beset democracy: the danger of taking privilege as a natural right. In this stagnant rural apathy, exemplified in hundreds of villages up and down England, may be seen the workings of the same dry rot that contributed to the fall of France and may still, even after victory, bring the roof of English democracy tottering about our ears.

Thinking of it, I think also of some words of an ancestor of mine, who got most of his education behind the plough. "You must make them suffer before you can make them understand."

## FACTORS IN THE DEFEAT OF FRANCE

By BRYHER

IN SPITE OF the paper shortage, books tumble off the presses purporting to explain the fall of Paris and the collapse of France as fast as Elizabethan ballads after a murder. Few seem to grasp the fundamental causes of the failure or they allude to them briefly, not as main facts but as mere details. I have had a fairly intimate knowledge of France since childhood and was in Paris as late as April, 1940, though I was called unpatriotic for predicting its downfall in the winter of 1939; my testimony is, at least, founded upon personal observation and facts and not upon hearsay, books or the theories of any particular group.

The three main factors in the defeat were to me:—

1. The failure of French industry to adopt modern methods of production.
2. The French attitude to women.
3. The conversion of the French army into a symbol instead of a prosaic reality, buttressed by Maginot lies instead of by the truth of imagination.

English people are so used to trade unions, industrial compensation, and old-age pensions that they forget that these things scarcely existed in France. The factories were appallingly dirty and insanitary, the hours of work were too long; if workers were sick or hurt, well, it was just too bad but nobody bothered about them. When people were too old to work, they begged, unless they had relatives or had contrived to save some francs from miserably inadequate wages. In many cities it was impossible for a man who belonged to a trade union to find work. Of course there were exceptions, but in