

Inglis Clark's 'Machinery and Ideals in Politics'

Introduction by Michael Roe

My earlier essay in this book refers to this document. Indeed my current thinking about Clark largely derives from contemplating what he says here. Richard Ely also discusses aspects of this essay by Clark.¹ Accordingly there is neither scope nor point for offering further generalisations as to the interest and meaning of Clark's words. Nor do the learned footnotes come from myself, Ely having done almost all that work. My present task has been mechanical. There is an early draft of the essay in the Clark papers held by the University of Tasmania Library, while printed versions appeared in the Federationists' journal, *The Commonwealth*, for 7 February 1895 at pp. 5-9, and in the *Launceston Examiner*, 21 and 23 February 1895. A few typographical errors in the former version were corrected in the second, but there remains need for some correction of the text, as is duly noted below.

Machinery and Ideals in Politics

Andrew Inglis Clark

We do not habitually recognise any correlation between things which we describe as mechanical and others which we designate as ideal. Yet it may be that in some instances there is much more connection than we usually suppose between things which we are accustomed to distinguish by those appellatives; and I have for a long time believed that in the sphere of politics the question of the kind of machinery by which ideals are to be more nearly approached, or by which we may at the least be more directly reminded of their existence and of their claims upon our aspirations and efforts, has seldom received the attention which its importance demands from us. On one occasion Matthew Arnold undertook to remind his contemporaries that they could not secure their political salvation by machinery; but whatever may be the amount of truth contained in the dictum, it is certain that the best work cannot be done in the domain of

1 In the paper on Clark's 1888 Memorandum on Chinese Immigration, and in that on Clark's view of the proper relation between Church and State.

politics any more than in any other sphere of human activity with defective or inappropriate tools.² It would be difficult to name a writer of this century who has displayed more insight and discrimination in the discussion of political questions than John Stuart Mill, and he has emphatically declared that the first criterion of the goodness of a government is the degree in which it tends to increase the sum of good qualities in the governed, collectively and individually; and he proceeds to observe that as it is the good qualities of the people which supply the moving force which works the machinery of the government, the second criterion of the merits of a government is the degree in which its machinery is adapted to take advantage of the good qualities of the people, and make them instruments for right purposes.³ It therefore follows that before we can determine which is the best form of government or, in other words, the best kind of political machinery for any particular people, we must previously ascertain the extent of their moral and intellectual attainments, and the character of their inherited sentiments and habits. It was at one time the custom of certain shortsighted and superficial opponents of democracy to cite the brief and stormy career of the second Republic in France as a proof of the inherited weakness and defects of all republican and democratic institutions. But these hasty critics conveniently ignored the fact that during the short period of the immediately preceding half-century three monarchical governments had been set up in France and each of them in turn had been overthrown. Since then a fourth monarchical government had [has] been erected and upset in the country, and the present French Republic has already existed a longer time than any previous government that has been set up in France since the Revolution of 1789. If the apparent stability of the present Republic in France is due to the fact that it is making better use of the good qualities of the French people than that which was made of them by any of the governments that preceded it, then it is undoubtedly the best form of government for that country. If, on the contrary, it is depending for support on the worst qualities of the French people, and is failing to provide a sphere for their highest political capacities and aspirations, it is doomed to follow the governments which have preceded it. The same assertion may be made with equal warranty in regard to every government now existing in Europe; but the length of time which a government incapable of making use of the best qualities of a people may continue to exist, and the manner in which it shall be abolished, depend upon the previous history and the particular characteristics of the people among whom it is established. There has not been any such sudden and violent change in the form of government as we usually describe as revolutionary in England for more than two hundred years, but it is none the less true that the actual form of government existing in that country one hundred years ago has totally passed away, and has been replaced by another in which a new set of institutions are found under the same names which were used to

2 Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, (ed.) J D Wilson, London, 1960 (first published 1869), especially pp. 60, 74-5.

3 C V Shields (ed.) J S Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, Indianapolis, 1958 [first published 1861]), pp. 25 ff.

describe the institutions of the same country two centuries earlier. The true and primary cause of the change has been the moral and intellectual progress of the English people, out of which have been evolved higher ideals of good government and national welfare which have required new institutions to realise them. The same causes have produced the more violent changes that have taken place during the same period in the political institutions of France, Germany, Italy and Spain. In each case the people's ideal of the true aim and utility of national existence and political organisation has outgrown the capacity of the machinery by which they were being governed.

It has been said that every country obtains a government as good as it deserves, and I believe that the statement is very largely true. But like all similar generalisations it requires some qualifications. A nation may deserve a better government than the one it possesses at a particular time because that government may be a temporary accident, and not the natural and legitimate product of the people's political capacity. A nation may also deserve a better form of government than the one it possesses at a particular period of its history in the sense that it is capable of being trained and prepared for the reception of a better form by virtue of its possession of particular qualities and aptitudes. But if a nation, in the highest and fullest sense of the word, deserves a better government than that which at any particular time it possesses, it will ultimately acquire it, because the desert in that case will include an earnest desire culminating in a deliberate effort to obtain it.

If the question is asked whether the peoples of the several Australasian Colonies are in possession of governments as good as they deserve, and if the enquiry be made in reference to the question of the capability of the Australian peoples to maintain and administer a form of government that would give better results than those produced by the political institutions now in existence in these colonies, I say at once that we deserve better government than we get. But if the question is asked with reference to the existence of any widespread desire for the possession of better political institutions or of any earnest effort to obtain them, then it may be that we get all we deserve because we have not yet manifested any deep desire, or put forth any earnest effort, to improve the political machinery around us. Yet we constantly hear on every side of us expressions of dissatisfaction with the conduct of our legislators and ministers, and it cannot be denied that a large amount of that dissatisfaction is well founded. But the curious part of the matter is that this expression of dissatisfaction generally takes the form of condemnation, or I might say denunciation, of the particular persons who happen to be legislators or ministers of the day in terms that would make a visitant from another world marvel how such men ever came to be placed repeatedly, as it frequently happens, in positions of responsibility and power. Yet it must be that these people are the most capable, or at least as capable as any others in the community, for the positions they occupy; or that there are other persons in the community more capable of doing the work of government, but who cannot be got to do it. If the second alternative is correct, the question of prime importance for us is, why the more capable men cannot be secured to govern us? If they are in the midst of us, and if the people really wish to be

governed by them, it must be our political machinery which prevents them being chosen. The only other possible explanation of the absence of the most capable men from our Parliaments and from our public life, is their own deliberate refusal to assume the task and the responsibilities of governing us; but I have no hesitation in saying that wherever such a state of things exists the character of the political machinery is largely responsible for it. Doubtless a large amount of the denunciation of ministers and legislators in which portions of the Australasian press indulge is unfair, but it unhappily tends to lower the tone and standard of political life to the level which it declares to be already reached by the persons assailed, and it might be found upon investigation that our forms of government and political machinery had some connection with the extravagance and unscrupulousness of some portions of the Australasian press by virtue of the occasions they created for the use of those weapons.

The machinery of government in each of the Australian Colonies is entirely representative, and I make this statement in full remembrance of the fact that the Legislative Council in some of the colonies is composed of members appointed by the Governor upon the nomination of the Ministers of the day. The Ministers who nominate the members of the Council are for the most part, if not entirely, legislators who are elected by the people and are responsible for the selection they make to that House of Parliament which is directly elected by the people; and the persons selected are not members of any particular section or class in the community. In fact it is very probable that a nominated Council often represents a larger variety of interests and opinions than a Council elected upon the basis of a restricted suffrage. Living, therefore, as we do in Australia under governments that may be truly described as representative, we shall do well to ask ourselves, what is the true principle and the recognised ideal of representative Government? It is assuredly not the absolute rule of the majority of the hour, for if such a result contained the essence and true principle of representative government, then every proposed law and every Executive act not specifically authorised before the occasion for it arises ought logically to be submitted to the vote of the whole body of electors. But immediately such a practice was established representative government would cease to exist, and we cannot therefore identify the aim and essence of representative government with a result which could be accomplished only by a process by which representative government would be abolished.

The true principle and essence of representative government is the recognition of the right of the most capable to govern, and the correlative right of the governed to determine the misrule of the incapable or dishonest who may at any time be found exercising the functions of government. Representative government, therefore, recognises the people as the ultimate source whence the necessary power to govern is derived. But as Guizot has well said, "All power which exists as a fact must, in order to become a right, act according to reason, justice, and truth," and "all the combinations of the political machine [then] ought to tend on the one hand to extract whatever of reason, justice or truth exists in society in order to apply it to the practical requirements of government, and on the other hand to promote the progress of society in reason, justice, and

truth and constantly to embody this progress of society [in the actual] structure of government."⁴

The fundamental piece of the machinery in every system of representative government is that which is used for the election of the legislators, and I have no hesitation in saying that a contested election of a member of the legislature for a large electoral district under the electoral methods used in the Australasian Colonies nearly always compels a successful candidate to undergo a series of experiences which every honourable and sensitive man must regard as more or less degrading to him. We make laws to preserve the purity of our Parliamentary elections and to punish severely all persons found guilty of bribery and corruption, and yet our contested elections continue to be costly events for a large majority of the candidates. This indicates some radical defect in the system, because it immediately falsifies the proposition that under representative government, political power is the free gift of the people, and not the personal possession of the legislator. Gross and direct bribery may have become comparatively rare, but so long as the love of power urges men to spend money to obtain it, and so long as the expenditure of money for this purpose promotes the result to which it is directed, the practice will continue. It is therefore evident that the full ideal of representative government will never be realised until the power and influence of money are eliminated from Parliamentary elections.

There have been many controversies as to whether the possession of a vote should be regarded as a natural right or as a privilege to be acquired by some exertion or exhibition of merit, or as a trust conferred by the community. For my own part I believe that it should be regarded as partaking of each of these three aspects, and that only those persons who are prepared to exercise it spontaneously with intelligence and honesty have the right to elect the makers and administrators of the law. The man who does not sufficiently value the suffrage to use it for his own welfare and protection, and who requires to be tempted in some way to use it, has ceased to have a right to exercise it for the purpose of creating a legislature which shall make laws for the government of other people besides himself. It may be that it is beyond the wit of man to devise an electoral system which shall eliminate every influence that impairs the purity of representative government at its base, but among a number of more or less imperfect methods we may find one which affords less scope than the others for the operation of detrimental agencies, and the use of which will bring us much nearer than we are at the present time to government by the most capable. It was long ago recognised by discriminating students of political science that a system which gives absolute power to the chance majority of the day might produce results as bad as any that have attended the rule of despots and oligarchies in the past, and to some of them it seemed that the surest protection against such an evil was to be found in a due representation of minorities. But the

4 F P G Guizot, *History of the Origin of Representative Government in Europe*, A R Scoble, translator, London, 1852 [first published 1821-2], p. 65. Interpolations correct Clark's deviations from this text.

representation of minorities would not necessarily secure the election of the most capable legislators. It would, however, give another chance for the election of the most capable; and from this starting point we advance to the position that the most perfect electoral system is that which gives the greatest possible number of chances for the election of the most capable and minimises the opportunities for the operation of all sinister influences and agencies. Such a system has, in my judgment, been offered in that proposed by the late Thomas Hare, and now generally known by his name. A few years ago a modification of it was contained in a Bill introduced into the Parliament of New Zealand to amend the law relating to Parliamentary elections in that Colony, but unhappily the Bill did not become law. The proposal was to divide the Colony into large electorates returning from six to eight members each, and to apply Mr. Hare's system of election to each separate electorate. Under this plan a further modification of Mr. Hare's method could be introduced which would enable each elector to give more effect to his preferences than is possible under the original system, by assigning progressive values to the successive positions of the names placed by the elector upon his voting paper. By means of this further modification the votes given by every elector for every candidate could be counted and the element of chance would be entirely eliminated from the system.

For some time after its first promulgation the Hare system was subjected to the usual criticism that awaits every new idea in politics, and it was declared to be utopian and impracticable; but it has been tried with various modifications in detail in several instances and found to be quite workable. The most conservative supporters of the rights of minorities and the strongest advocates of the widest possible extension of the suffrage would find it [to] fulfil every condition which they allege to be necessary for the equitable representation of all interests and classes, and I am persuaded that its adoption in the Australasian Colonies would inaugurate a new era in Australasian politics.

But our electoral systems are not the only parts of the machinery of our Australasian constitutions which I believe to be defective for the purposes of securing the true objects of representative government. The daily dependence for their tenure of office by the members of the executive branch of the Government upon the voters of a majority of one of the Houses of Parliament has degraded the work of legislation in Australasia into a game of shuttlecock, in which the players are separated into contending factions by their personal ambitions and antipathies. The responsibility of the Ministers of the Crown to the House of Commons in England was evolved in the midst of historical and social conditions which never existed in Australasia, and its incompatibility with a genuine democracy is being demonstrated in its original home. Twenty years ago Mr. Frederick Harrison, writing in the *Fortnightly Review*, declared that the practical head of the State of England "had become a mere gladiator in a mob of rhetoricians, a plaything of factions, of necessity a demagogue, by office a stopgap;"⁵ and since then the tactics of the Irish members and the attempts made

5 The precise reference has not been found. Frederic Harrison wrote many words to this effect, especially in the *Fortnightly Review*, as may be pursued through W

by each of the other parties to secure their support have not made the description one jot less truthful. Opponents of democracy may be disposed to ascribe to it alone the very unsatisfactory manner in which legislation is conducted in England and the Australasian Colonies at the present time; but the root of the evil is to be found in the attempt which is being made in both cases to govern democracies – that is, communities in which the ultimate source of all political power is the whole body of the people – by means of monarchical and aristocratic machinery. The late Mr. Bagehot, in his highly instructive book on the English Constitution affirms, that Cabinet government is only possible in what he styles “differential [*deferential*] nations,” and of such nations he declares England to be the type. The book was written more than a quarter of a century ago, and he describes the mass of the people in England at that time as being practically governed by what he calls “the theatrical show of society.”⁶ It is doubtful whether the picture is equally true of the majority of the people of England at the present time; and with the advance of education among the masses and the consequent increase in the discussion of political and social questions among them, they must become more and more emancipated from such a condition of mental servility and superstition. The social regime painted by Mr. Bagehot has never existed in Australasia, and if his deductions from it in regard to the successful working of Cabinet government are correct, we ought not be surprised to find that the system has proved a failure in these Colonies.

In copying the government of the mother country so far as the surrounding circumstances permitted them to do so, the framers of the Constitutions of the several Australasian Colonies believed that they could not err in attempting to follow as closely as possible a model which the experience of ten generations of their forefathers had developed. Yet if their national prejudices had not precluded them from doing it, they might have profitably examined the political institutions of several other nations in which the social conditions were much more similar to those existing in Australasia than to those existing in England. Among the constitutions of many of the separate states of the American Union, or in the federal government of Switzerland, they might have found a model which, with small modifications, would have been well suited to colonial communities. If that course had been followed the political history of Australasia would have been greatly different from what it has been. Perhaps it would have been devoid of many of those exciting episodes which now appear to us to have most emphatically exhibited the political capacity of the Australasian people, but it would also have been without many of the pages that record the evil results of an unstable Executive bargaining for power with unscrupulous politicians and local anti-national interests. The history of some of the Colonies exhibits nearly as many changes of Ministries as there have been sessions of

E Houghton (ed.), *The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, 1824-1900*, volume 2, Toronto, 1972. See too M S Vogelor (ed.) *Frederick Harrison, Order and Progress*, Hassocks, Sussex, 1975.

6 Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, London, 1905 (first published 1867), p. 265. The interpolation and italics correct Clark’s deviations.

Parliament, and it surely does not require any argument to demonstrate that in the midst of so much commotion and conflict many important and necessary functions of an Executive must have been very imperfectly performed and that useful and urgent legislation must have been repeatedly delayed.

The series of political events directly produced by the form and working of political machinery used by a nation cannot fail to largely influence the political character of its people. We cannot, therefore, accept as true the dictum contained in the well-known couplet of Pope, in which he assigns to fools the task of contesting for forms of government, and asserts that the form "which is best administered is best," because it totally ignores the question of the capability or tendency of forms to utilize the highest energies of a people or to provide temptations and opportunities for their baser qualities and inclinations. Of the English Constitution, Mr. Bryce has said that "it stands and prospers in virtue of the traditions that still live among English statesmen and the reverence that has ruled English citizens," but that in any other country it would "be full of difficulties and dangers." But speaking of the Constitution of the United States, he says: "It forms the mind and habits of the people; it trains them to habits of legality; it strengthens their conservative interests and their sense of the value of stability and permanence in political arrangements. It makes them feel that to comprehend their supreme instrument of government is a personal duty incumbent on each of them. It familiarizes them with, and attaches them by ties of pride and reverence to those fundamental truths on which the Constitution is based."⁷ No such claim can be truly made for the influence of the political institutions of Australasia, for the simple reason that they do not embody or recognise any fundamental principle of government beyond the opinions and wishes of the majority of the day. Hence the inevitable result of the Cabinet system of government in these Colonies is a constant succession of short-lived Ministries and dissolutions of Parliament, destroying all pretensions to stability of purpose and policy, and encouraging struggle for the possession of the ministerial offices.

It has been argued that the system of Cabinet government brings to the front the ablest men in the legislature and puts them in their proper places as the leaders of the people. But this opinion is largely an illusion. The system may evolve the ablest leaders in special circumstances, but its tendency under ordinary conditions is to destroy true leadership and to make nominal leaders of the most subservient followers of their party. It must also be always remembered that the system includes an Opposition which is always ready to mutilate and deform the most beneficial measures of a Ministry simply as a display of strength, and hence Ministerial proposals are often framed to present the fewest possible number of points of attack than to grapple vigorously with the necessities of the

7 James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, New York, 1903, vol. 1 (first published 1888), volume 1, page 407. As presented there the passage begins, 'It frames the mind and temper of the people; ...', and otherwise differs slightly from Clark's version. The preceding reference to 'the English Constitution' is not at that point, and remains undiscovered.

country. This is certainly not true leadership of the people, however dexterous an exhibition it may be of tactical skill in Parliamentary warfare. If we wish to get true leaders we must offer them some fixity of tenure in their position, and when we refuse it to them we compel them either to abandon us to the guide of inferior men, or to make bargains for support which hamper them in the execution of their plans, and by which they are insidiously deteriorated. Men of exceptional ability and rare strength of character may do good work under almost any system, but the purpose for which the machinery of popular government ought to be designed is not to provide for the government of the people by leaders of exceptional qualifications, but to provide the best means of teaching the people to govern themselves, with the assistance of such leaders as may from time to time be available.

So far as the performance of public functions by individuals acting as the organs or agents of the community is a necessity of its political existence, it is eminently desirable that the discharge of those functions should be committed to the citizens most capable of performing them; but let it always be remembered that true democracy is government by law, and that it will produce its best results when the whole body of the people recognise that they are themselves responsible for the character of the law and the manner in which it is administered. This result cannot be obtained without a constant sense of citizenship, or in other words, a sense of partnership in the collective life of the nation whose honor and welfare, and whose disgrace and detriment, are shared by all the members of it. When this sentiment is strongly developed in a people, they will be well governed under any institutions which permit them to take an active part in the work. But it may be that when the sense of citizenship is weak or drooping some institutions may be better fitted than others to strengthen and arouse it, and it is in this connection that political machinery has an important relation to political ideas and purposes. Not that machinery alone can create political ideals in the minds of a people. On the contrary, the ideals must exist before the machinery required for their realisation can be devised. But if machinery inadequate to give expression to the highest ideal of political welfare possessed by a nation is allowed to remain after its insufficiency has been manifested, it will be used on every convenient occasion by retrogressionists and dishonest politicians for their own purposes and to the detriment of the nation; and such I believe to be the position of affairs in Australasia at the present time in regard to the great question of Federation.

Much adverse criticism has been directed against the proposal to unite the several Australasian Colonies at the present time under a Federal Constitution upon the ground that the provincial jealousies and antagonisms which now exist in each of them would permit nothing beyond a mechanical union to be created. But this criticism makes no attempt to estimate the extent to which these jealousies and antagonisms have been produced by the past and present separation of the Colonies, or to calculate the extent to which a federal form of government would expand the sympathies and political conceptions of the people who would live under it, and particularly of the men who would be called upon to administer it. It might be a difficult position to establish that the political institutions of

the Australasian Colonies are in themselves obstacles to Australasian Federation and prevent the will of the people being carried out in that direction. Yet it cannot be denied that so far they have proved facile instruments for the dominancy of provincial interests and self-seeking politicians; they have helped us to crush Federal and national sentiments. At the same time it must be admitted that our national aspirations have hitherto been vague and fluctuating, and our greatest need today is a clearer vision of a national ideal which shall have power to attract us to follow it over every obstacle that meets us and to uphold us against every discouragement that our present environment engenders. The intensely provincial aspect under which all political questions are inevitably considered under existing conditions by the people of each separate Colony persistently excludes from their view the larger relations in which the same question would necessarily be discussed by them if they formed an integral part of the whole people of Australasia. Hence the political life of each separate Colony is compressed within a sphere too circumscribed for the expansion of national sentiments into their proper proportions in the midst of the local interests and personal aims which find a congenial atmosphere and an exaggerated importance in such a restricted arena. But as the sea receives into its bosom the discoloured waters of all the rivers that flow into it and obliterates their impurities when they mingle with its larger flood, so we look for Australian Federation to disperse in the collective life of the Australasian people the pettiness of our provincial politics. Doubtless those of us who shall live to see the Federation of Australasia an accomplished fact will continue to see many things that will remind us that political machinery alone cannot regenerate human nature; but for nations as for individuals the ideal is a fountain of perpetual youth, and to drink deeply of it will never fail to invigorate, to purify and elevate us.

