Is Congress Superfluous?

THE DEADLOCK OF DEMOCRACY: FOUR-PARTY POLITICS IN AMERICA. By James MacGregor Burns. ENGLEWOOD CLIFFS, N. J.: PRENTICE-HALL, INC., 1963. 388 pp. $5.95.

Reviewed by Francis G. Wilson

SOME years ago a liberal Democrat in San Francisco was getting his campaign under way by deciding what he should promise each identifiable group. Finally, he asked his advisors: "And what shall I promise the gypsies?" Now there were between four and five hundred gypsies in his city district; he believed he had to promise them something. I assume the story is true, but it also reminded me of Professor Burns.

For the author of the present volume wants a "revolution" in which a strong President, unhampered by Congressional opposition, will govern apparently in the interest of urban minorities. He will impose on them something Burns would probably call political liberalism. Most things in the book seem a little vague, but not that Congress should become a supine political organ, whose majorities would override traditional, conservative, as well as rural, public opinion. It can be said for Burns without notable unfairness that the tragedy of America is the body of ideas held by the Framers, the authors of *The Federalist*, and those political party leaders who have in Congress and in state political organizations resisted the liberalistic centralization of American government.

Burns has an ideological version of the struggles of the political parties. He bemoans the trouble the "good" politicians have had in getting around the check-and-balance system that James Madison and his colleagues managed to get into the Constitution. One might expect the author to advocate a version of parliamentary government, but he does not. He seems content with strong, dominating Presidential leadership. Perhaps he steps with the times, for one of the characteristics of modern times has been the weakening of parliaments and the rise of the unbeatable, charismatic executive. At its height the political party was dedicated to principle; more and more the modern political party is a group of people attached to a leader. One might argue with Burns over the interpretation of the twists and turns of political party conflicts, for it is certain that believers in the American tradition, conservatives if you will, would rejoice in the failure of many of the overweening aspirants for power. But Burns' magnificent demigods defeat themselves by doing absurd things; they engage in practical politics more like demagogues than demigods. Burns says "we" have lost control, but it is really only the bureaucratic minority that wants to tax and govern the majority in order to carry out a program the majority does not seem too eager to have whiplashed about it.

"HISTORY" is a far-reaching business. Why not go back farther than the Framers? Why not consider political factions in the ancient world? What happened to them in the cities of Classical civilization? Oswald Spengler wrote about the cosmopolis of the old times. But whether or not one agrees with his idea that the stone city is the burial ground of a civilization, we can always raise the question whether the programs Burns seems to want will produce better results than the benevolence of the Antonine Emperors. Why not consider what happens in other societies when the principle of balanced and limited authority breaks down? On the whole, the history of political parties is unimpressive. Political parties have not saved the ambitious efforts to establish parliamentary government over much of the world, even in the homeland of parties in Western Europe.

A PRIMARY theme of this book is that we have a four-party system, a Presidential Democratic Party, a Presidential Republican Party, and Congressional Democrats and Congressional Republicans. The idea seems to be that the President should dominate the Presidential Party and in happy moments the Congressional Party will join with the Presidential Party and do just what the President says they ought to do. The chief check on the march of urban liberalism will be the conscience of the President, not the structure of government believed in by Madison and respected by Jefferson. One need not stop at four parties, for one may include a dozen other groupings of Members of Congress, and other variations of theme to be found in state politics. I suppose it depends much on how a party is defined. But Burns is clearly interested in a national centralization of power under a President who is supported by liberal Democrats elected in reorganized city Congressional districts. It has been said that the redistricting of Congressional seats would help the Republicans, since it would transfer to the suburbs many Congressmen elected by the post-Tammany big-city machines. We must wait and see, but conservatives may gain if the concentrated power of the urban centers is reduced.

Burns seems firmly attached to city ideas, since he speaks caustically of rural control, though he does not affirm the wisdom of the barbarous areas of our contemporary cities. Nevertheless, a conservative may say with substantial evidence that the predominant trends in Congressional sentiment are the majority sentiments of the country, while the President and his bureaucracy believe themselves more intelligent and more capable of responding to the "needs" of the country (pp. 259–260). Perhaps the President and the bureaucracy represent what they consider to be the liberal or modern "needs" of the nation, while Congress often holds these irresponsible demands in check through a party system, grass-rooted and stubborn, which works within the historic structure given us by the Framers of the Constitution.

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THUS, according to Willmoore Kendall, the ideal of the President's government is plebiscitary democracy, while Congress represents the majority of the people, not the urban interests alone. These are the "two majorities" rather than the "four parties" with which we should be concerned. If majority sentiment throughout the country favored the numerous reforms for weakening Congress, or strengthening the liberal factions in it, there would be short delay in the inauguration of the destruction of the traditional structures of Congress. While the Congressional liberals and bureaucrats talk about the "needs" they see, the Congress itself seems to represent in an effective sense the traditional judgments of the people, rural and urban. The majority seems unimpressed with vague programs which might strengthen the bureaucracy and weaken the representative system.

But what is the program? Burns is as important for the things he does not say as for the things he does. There is no discussion of business, the corporation and of private property; there is no respect shown for federalism, *i. e.*, the power of the states, because there is an implicit focusing on the political impact of urban agglomerations. But the liberal program is there in vague language; it is the bland, the sweet revolution, for the destruction of the Constitution and the traditional American system of government. Critics have said the main difference between the goals of the liberals, the socialists, and the communists is one of the timing to be used in the up-ending of society. Conservatives are simply not going that way, so they represent a reactionary mentality that must be fought and discredited at all costs. For example, the liberal will not worry about religion provided there is in it no theology, and the only doctrine is a social theory which is a form of socialism. The liberal will use this kind of religion, but in the end it is as useless and false as Christianity under the pens of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Both extremes of the left spectrum want a socialist society, in which private property is hardly recognized, and the planned society is laid out under the prudence of the bureaucracy and the dominant party. The liberal program would contain, it might seem, all of the failures and half-

(*Continued on page 13*)

Re-Examination of the Irish Famine

THE GREAT HUNGER. By Cecil Woodham-Smith. NEW YORK: HARPER AND ROW, 1963. 191 pp. $5.

Reviewed by John P. McCarthy

IN HIS *History of England*[1], Hilaire Belloc noted the tendency of the 19th-century historians of England either to ignore or simply give passing attention to one of the greatest catastrophes of modern history, the Irish famine of the 1840's. The amount of human suffering involved should place it in the same category as the persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the massacring of the Ukranians in the 1930's.

The fact that the famine was not an artificial famine or an act of genocide, as some Irish nationalists assert, does not remove all elements of culpability in connection with it. Furthermore, the sufferings of the famine and the hopelessly inadequate assistance afforded to meet them had repercussions which drastically affected society, politics, and, indeed, international relations throughout the English-speaking world.

There was a loss in population in Ireland of more than two millions, mainly by death, but partly through the refuge of emigration. The consequences of that emigration, and the influence it had on the new lands where it went, especially the United States, is only now beginning to be appreciated by historians.

CECIL WOODHAM-SMITH, in *The Great Hunger*, continues in the same fashion she followed in her *The Reason Why* and *Florence Nightengale* of combining scholarship with popular history. Written almost like a newspaper account and consequently perfectly suitable for the general reader, *The Great Hunger* is also historiographically legitimate. Perhaps, because she is writing popular history, Mrs. Woodham-Smith tends to present almost exclusively a chronicling survey of the events, personalities, the calamities, and the misery of the famine years.

At times she does suggest and briefly discuss the long-range causes and effects of the famine, for instance, the land tenure system in Ireland, the new nationalist spirit in Ireland, and the Anglophobia of Irish-America. Since her comments on these matters are well-founded, more serious readers only regret that she did not devote more space to this analytical and speculative approach. Because she does not, the reading at times becomes tedious despite her brilliant style. (One can imagine the tedium which might have resulted if the work were written by a professional historian.)

The crime of the British Government against Ireland during the years of the famine and, for that matter, most of the 19th century, was one of omission rather than commission. It was an entirely different situation from that of the 18th century Penal Days when the Anglo-Irish Government in Dublin, with the approbation of the British Government, was engaged in genocide against the native Irish Catholic population. Now, the penal laws had been repealed and political rights were being given to the Catholics as a result of Daniel O'Connell's struggle for Catholic Emancipation.

ALL that remained for the Irish nationalists to demand was the restoration of an independent Irish

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of any meaning. "A plan to resist all planning," Oakeshott has written, "*may* [italics mine] be better than its opposite, but it belongs to the same style of politics." Oakeshott, at another time, quotes John Jay in order to prove that the United States Constitution is a "Rationalist" document—newly-minted in Philadelphia in 1787 without regard to tradition or experience. At this point, of course, Oakeshott falls into the classic rationalist error of believing that what is said about a social phenomenon is true. The many and diverse origins of that remarkable document are so well known as to need no mention. Only the most extreme of extreme traditionalists (which, of course, is precisely what Oakeshott is) could seriously hold that the American Constitution was a product of Rationalism—in the pejorative sense in which Oakeshott always uses the word.

Oakeshott, like all conservatives, has had to decide between an ideological and a situational position. That is, he has had to choose whether to conserve certain selected values of a tradition or simply to support the *status quo*. That such a penetrating critic of the times as Oakeshott should choose the latter course would seem to be paradoxical; yet, this is exactly what he has done. When he opposes "amending the arrangements of a society so as to make them agree with the provisions of an ideology," he does not hesitate to carry his structures to their logical conclusion: he censures Hayek for attempting to substitute the free market for a "scientifically" planned economy.

The essence of Oakeshott's thought will now be clear; he is a radical sceptic who believes that a tradition forms its own values and who refuses to accept any extrenal and objective standards. He comes dangerously close, in fact, to defending the doctrine that whatever is, is right. His fondness for metaphor, his dislike of clear-cut principles, the occasional obscurity of his language and his disinterest in the truth of religions (which to him are important only in so far as they are socially useful) all derive from his one fundamental belief: there are no objective values in any sense of the word.

In the space allotted to me for this review, I have directed my attention to the major points of disagreement between the philosophy of Oakeshott and the views generally held by most American conservatives. I would be creating a misimpression, however, if I did not conclude by stressing the high place that Oakeshott holds among Western political theorists; a place earned for him principally by the essays in this book, written over a period of 20 years, and saying, more often than not, what needs to be said in a way equalled by few of his contemporaries.

NOTES

[1]Cf. Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1959).

[2]Cf. F. A. Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1952), and Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 1945).

[3]Cf. Sir Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), F. A. Hayek, *op. cit.*, and Karl Popper, "On the Sources of Knowledge and Ignorance," *Encounter*, September, 1962.

Is Congress Superfluous?

(Continued from page 6)

successes of parochial European socialism during the last century. Liberalism in politics has become the politics of the pronunciamento, while those who are conservatives are blasted as the muddle-heads of the up-to-date world.

THE Presidential Democrats, the author informs us, are liberals (p. 199). They favor governmental power to redistribute physical and psychic income, *i.e.*, private property has no natural rights that government needs to respect. They are internationalist in foreign policy, that is, accommodative. One can point to such examples as the policies on Cuba, Laos, and Africa. The Presidential Party, he says, has been the "popular" or the populistic party; it wants national, *i.e.*, Presidential control, over elections, and it sometimes espouses majoritarian and equalitarian doctrines, while it is deciding what the needs of the mute masses may be. Presidential Democrats respond primarily to urban voters and their organizational dictatorships. And then, all of the jaded schemes for social welfare that have been tried with but indifferent results in other countries for a century past should be adopted here to damage both our professions and our fiscal stability.

In turn, the conservatives are ridiculed. The Republicans do not carry the most important constituency of all, the intellectuals who write mythology into the nation's annals, who produce the textbooks for the young, and who thereby propagate their verdicts on leaders. All of the so-called "liberal Presidents" seem greater than any of the conservative ones (pp. 177–178). As the conservatives organize the intellectuals, however, and the Foundations give them a chance, if ever, the latent intellectual support of conservatism may come radically to the surface. Woodrow Wilson, says the author, was right about the League and Senator Lodge was wrong. (pp. 136ff) Senator Dirksen bayed. (p. 182) Nixon, after all, seemed to have a secret fund. (p.190) McCarthy went on a rampage against the White House, rather than the other way around. (p. 192) Eisenhower did best when he worked with Democrats; (p. 194) and the ignoramuses, when they are not Democrats, seem to attract the attention of Burns, but this is not unusual in political journalism. (p. 208 e. g.) The Republicans are ridiculed in extenso, (pp. 285ff) which reveals the malice and the lack of scholarship in this book. By saying (contrary to some statistical evidence) that Kennedy's Catholicism lost him more votes than it gained, the author makes Protestants more prejudiced than urban Catholics.

A WORD in conclusion. If we would stop the liberalistic revolution which Burns offers us, perhaps we conservatives also should do some tradition breaking. I would propose as some of the Framers of the Constitution wanted in 1787 to have the President elected by the House of Representatives, and for no more than four years without re-eligibility. I would amend the Constitution to make sure that neither Congress nor the Supreme Court interferes with the right of the states to regulate and foster religious liberty and to control elections. Perhaps happily neither the reforms of Burns nor those just mentioned are likely to be adopted before the class war hits us, but good.