Corruption at Elections

Dated August 20, 1852 / Published September 4, 1852

Just before the late House of Commons separated, it resolved to heap up as many difficulties as possible for its successors in their way to Parliament. It voted a Draconian law against bribery, corruption, intimidation, and electioneering sharp practices in general.

A long list of questions is drawn up, which, by this enactment, may be put to petitioners or sitting members, the most searching and stringent that can be conceived. They may be required on oath to state who were their agents, and what communications they held with them. They may be asked and compelled to state, not only what they know, but what they "believe, conjecture, and suspect," as to money expended either by themselves or anyone else acting—authorized or not authorized—on their behalf. In a word, no mem-

ber can go through the strange ordeal without risk of perjury, if he have the slightest idea that it is possible or likely that anyone has been led to overstep on his behalf the limits of the law.

Now, even supposing this law to take it for granted that the new legislators will use the same liberty as the clergy, who only believe *some* of the Thirty-Nine Articles, yet contrive to sign them *all*, yet there remain, nevertheless, clauses sufficient to make the new Parliament the most virginal assembly that ever made speeches and passed laws for the three kingdoms. And in juxtaposition with the general election immediately following, this law secures to the Tories the glory that under their administration the greatest purity of election has been theoretically proclaimed, and the greatest amount of electoral corruption has been practically carried out.

> A fresh election is proceeded with, and here a scene of *bribery, corruption, violence, drunkenness and murder* ensues, *unparalleled* since the times of the old Tory monopoly reigned supreme before. We actually hear of soldiers with loaded guns, and bayonets fixed, taking Liberal electors by force, dragging them under the landlord's eyes to vote against their own consciences, and these soldiers shooting with deliberate aim the people who dared to sympathize with the captive electors, and committing wholesale murder on the unresisting people! [Allusion to the event at Six Mile Bridge, Limerick, County Clare.] It may be said: That was in Ireland! Ay, and in England they have employed their police to break the stalls of those opposed to them; they have sent their organized gangs of midnight ruffians prowling through the streets to intercept and intimidate the Liberal electors; they have opened the cesspools of drunkenness; they have showered the gold of corruption, as at Derby, and in almost every contested place they have exercised systematic intimidation.

Thus far Ernest Jones's *People's Paper*. Now, after this Chartist weekly paper, hear the weekly paper of the opposite

party, the most sober, the most rational, the most moderate organ of the industrial bourgeoisie, the London *Economist:*

> We believe we may affirm, at this general election, there has been more *truckling*, more *corruption*, more *intimidation*, more *fanaticism* and more *debauchery* than on any previous occasion. It is reported that bribery has been more extensively resorted to at this election than for many previous years. . . . Of the amount of intimidation and undue influence of every sort which has been practised at the late election, it is probably impossible to form an exaggerated estimate. . . . And when we sum up all these things—the brutal drunkenness, the low intrigues, the wholesale corruption, the barbarous intimidation, the integrity of candidates warped and stained, the honest electors who are ruined, the feeble ones who are suborned and dishonored; the lies, the stratagems, the slanders, which stalk abroad in the daylight, naked and not ashamed—the desecration of holy words, the soiling of noble names—we stand aghast at the holocaust of victims, of destroyed bodies and lost souls, on whose funeral pile a new Parliament is reared.

The means of corruption and intimidation were the usual ones: direct government influence. Thus on an electioneering agent at Derby, arrested in the flagrant act of bribing, a letter was found from Major Beresford, the Secretary at War, wherein that same Beresford opens a credit upon a commercial firm for electioneering moneys. *The Poole Herald* publishes a circular from the Admiralty House to the half-pay officers, signed by the commander-in-chief of a naval station, requesting their votes for the ministerial candidates.—Direct force of arms has also been employed, as at Cork, Belfast, Limerick (at which latter place eight persons were killed). —Threats of ejectment by landlords against their farmers, unless they voted with them. The land agents of Lord Derby herein gave the example to their colleagues.—Threats of exclusive dealing against shopkeepers, of dismissal against workmen, intoxication, etc., etc.—To these *profane* means of corruption *spiritual* ones were added by the Tories; the royal

proclamation against Roman Catholic processions was issued in order to inflame bigotry and religious hatred; the no-popery cry was raised everywhere. One of the results of this proclamation were the Stockport riots. The Irish priests, of course, retorted with similar weapons.

The election is hardly over, and already a single Queen's Counsel has received from twenty-five places instructions to invalidate the returns to Parliament on account of bribery and intimidation. Such petitions against elected members have been signed, and the expenses of the proceedings raised at Derby, Cockermouth, Barstaple, Harwich, Canterbury, Yarmouth, Wakefield, Boston, Huddersfield, Windsor, and a great number of other places. Of eight to ten Derbyite members it is proved that, even under the most favorable circumstances, they will be rejected on petition.

The principal scenes of this bribery, corruption and intimidation were, of course, the agricultural counties and the Peers' Boroughs, for the conservation of the greatest possible number of which latter the Whigs had expended all their acumen in the Reform Bill of 1831. The constituencies of large towns and of densely populated manufacturing counties were, by their peculiar circumstances, very unfavorable ground for such maneuvers.

Days of general election are in Britain traditionally the bacchanalia of drunken debauchery, conventional stockjobbing terms for the discounting of political consciences, the richest harvest times of the publicans. As an English paper says, "these recurring *saturnalia* never fail to leave enduring traces of their pestilential presence." Quite naturally so. They are saturnalia in the ancient Roman sense of the word. The master then turned servant, the servant turned master. If the servant be master for one day, on that day brutality will reign supreme. The masters were the grand dignitaries of the ruling classes, or sections of classes, the servants formed the mass of these same classes, the privileged electors encircled by the mass of the nonelectors, of those thousands

that had no other calling than to be mere hangers-on, and whose support, vocal or manual, always appeared desirable, were it only on account of the theatrical effect.

If you follow up the history of British elections for a century past or longer, you are tempted to ask, not why British Parliaments were so bad, but on the contrary, how they managed to be even as good as they were, and to represent as much as they did, though in a dim refraction, the actual movement of British society. Just as opponents of the representative system must feel surprised on finding that legislative bodies in which the abstract majority, the accident of the mere number, is decisive, yet decide and resolve according to the necessities of the situation—at least during the period of their full vitality. It will always be impossible, even by the utmost straining of logical deductions, to derive from the relations of mere numbers the necessity of a vote in accordance with the actual state of things; but from a given state of things the necessity of certain relations of members will always follow as of itself. The traditional bribery of British elections—what else was it, but another form, as brutal as it was popular, in which the relative strength of the contending parties showed itself? Their respective means of influence and of dominion, which on other occasions they used in a *normal* way, were here enacted for a few days in an abnormal and more or less burlesque manner. But the premise remained that the candidates of the rivaling parties represented the interests of the mass of the electors, and that the privileged electors again represented the interests of the non-voting mass, or rather, that this voteless mass had, as yet, no specific interest of its own. The Delphic priestesses had to become intoxicated by vapors to enable them to find oracles; the British people must intoxicate itself with gin and porter to enable it to find its oracle-finders, the legislators. And where these oracle-finders were to be looked for, that was a matter of course.

This relative position of classes and parties underwent a

radical change from the moment the industrial and commercial middle classes, the bourgeoisie, took up its stand as an official party at the side of the Whigs and Tories, and especially from the passing of the Reform Bill in 1831. These bourgeois were in no wise fond of costly electioneering maneuvers, of *faux frais* of general elections. They considered it cheaper to compete with the landed aristocracy by general moral than by personal pecuniary means. On the other hand they were conscious of representing a universally predominant interest of modern society. They were, therefore, in a position to demand that electors should be ruled by their common national interests, not by personal and local motives, and the more they recurred to this postulate, the more the latter species of electoral influence was, by the very composition of constituencies, centered in the landed aristocracy, but withheld from the middle classes. Thus the bourgeoisie contended for the principle of moral elections and forced the enactment of laws in that sense, intended, each of them, as safeguards against the local influence of the landed aristocracy; and indeed, from 1831 down, bribery adopted a more civilized, more hidden, form, and general elections went off in a more sober way than before. When at last the mass of the people ceased to be a mere chorus, taking a more or less impassioned part in the struggle of the official heroes, drawing the lots among them, rioting, in bacchantic carouse, at the creation of parliamentary divinities, like the Cretan centaurs at the birth of Jupiter, and taking pay and treat for such participation in their glory—when the Chartists surrounded in threatening masses the whole circle within which the official election struggle must come off, and watched with scrutinizing mistrust every movement taking place within it—then an election like that of 1852 could not but call for universal indignation, and elicit even from the conservative *Times*, for the first time, some words in favor of general suffrage, and make the whole mass of the British proletariat shout as with one voice. The foes of reform, they have given

reformers the best arguments; such is an election under the class system; such is a House of Commons with such a system of election!

In order to comprehend the character of bribery, corruption and intimidation, such as they have been practiced in the late election, it is necessary to call attention to a fact which operated in a parallel direction.

If you refer to the general elections since 1831, you will find that, in the same measure as the pressure of the voteless majority of the country upon the privileged body of electors was increasing, as the demand was heard louder, from the middle classes for an extension of the circle of constituencies, from the working class to extinguish every trace of a similar privileged circle—that in the same measure the number of electors who actually voted grew less and less, and the constituencies thus more and more contracted themselves. Never was this fact more striking than in the late election.

Let us take, for instance, London. In the City the constituency numbers 26,728; only 10,000 voted. The Tower Hamlets number 23,534 registered electors; only 12,000 voted. In Finsbury, of 20,025 electors, not one-half voted. In Liverpool, the scene of one of the most animated contests, of 17,433 registered electors, only 13,000 came to the polls.

These examples will suffice. What do they prove? The apathy of the privileged constituencies. And this apathy, what proves it? That they have outlived themselves—that they have lost every interest in their own political existence. This is in no wise apathy against politics in general, but against a species of politics the result of which, for the most part, can only consist in helping the Tories to oust the Whigs, or the Whigs to conquer the Tories. The constituencies feel instinctively that the decision lies no longer either with Parliament or with the making of Parliament. Who repealed the Corn Laws? Assuredly not the voters who had elected a protectionist Parliament, still less the protectionist Parliament itself, but only and exclusively the pressure from without. In

this pressure from without, in other means of influencing Parliament than by voting, a great portion even of the voters now believe. They consider the hitherto lawful mode of voting as an antiquated formality, but from the moment Parliament should make front against the pressure from without, and dictate laws to the nation in the sense of its narrow constituencies, they would join the general assault against the whole antiquated system of machinery.

The bribery and intimidation practiced by the Tories were, then, merely violent experiments for bringing back to life dying electoral bodies which have become incapable of production, and which can no longer create decisive electoral results and really national Parliaments. And the result? The old Parliament was dissolved, because at the end of its career it had dissolved into sections which brought each other to a complete standstill. The new Parliament begins where the old one ended; it is paralytic from the hour of its birth.

(Marx)