

Republicanism in France.

THE difficulty in the definition of a republic is a familiar one. Every one speaks of France, but not of Russia, as a republic; and few will deny that Great Britain, spite of crown and aristocracy, is nearly as much entitled to be called a republic as she ever will be. Perhaps a rough but satisfactory definition would make a republic a representative government, in which democracy is the rule for the individual, while there is just enough centralization in the government to secure a good working administration. Examined by this test, it would seem that our Confederation, for example, did not deserve to be called a republic, or anything more than a congeries of republics, by reason of its lack of centralization; and it is to be feared that the French Republic is as little deserving of the title, by reason of its superabundance of centralization.

Frenchmen are not generally flyaways; in most of the relations of life they are sober, calculating, foresighted, forehanded men. Few of them are so low in the scale of economic humanity as to be without some small stake in the welfare of the country: why should any considerable number of them desire in politics to give life and movement to such episodes as that to which General Boulanger has given name and perhaps fame? It may very well be that the lack of balance already referred to will furnish an answer. The essential elements of democracy, the equality of all men before the law, and the right of each man to declare his will by vote on the subjects which lie nearest to him, are now features of the French political system. They have not yet been carried to an ideal point, perhaps; but almost every change of government in this century is a landmark for some advance in this direction. The last twenty years in particular have seen a distinct and new development in the disposition of Frenchmen to assert for themselves not only the republican privilege of choosing national representatives, but the democratic privilege of managing their own immediate concerns, either directly or through local assemblies. By this development the French voter, if he has got nothing else, has gained the power to annoy the Government. It becomes then a serious question how far the political system of the country has been so subjected to parallel development as to avoid giving voters provocation for such annoyances.

We are somewhat familiar in this country with the name and attributes of the so-called "spoils system." Some of its evil effects have been covered over by the natural capacity of most Americans for executive work; even when "rotated" into office they are apt to do their work far better than there was any good reason to expect. But the evil effects cannot be concealed altogether. Defalcations and scandals in one department of Government work after another sap the confidence of the voters in the party which permits them. Even such minor inconveniences as the going astray of letters play their part in alienating votes. Finally, what is the democracy to do but that which it is apt to do even in case of a panic or a bad harvest—put the blame on the party in power, and vote its opponent into its place.

If this be the case in the United States, whose political system has been only so far centralized beyond

that of the Confederation as to bring the Government into contact with a comparatively few well-defined interests, what must be the result under a governmental system like that of France, where spoils is the guiding-star of party, and where the Government, nevertheless, essays to manage countless interests which under our system are left to individual enterprise? Such a system, applied to an American population without restriction of suffrage, would result in an immediate revolution, not of parties alone, but of the whole political system. With a French population, never used to anything but dependence on the Government, change of the system being unthinkable, the extended suffrage can be used to annoy, or in case of profound dissatisfaction to overturn, the Government.

The contrast is stronger still when we consider the influence of tradition. The spoils system is no more or less than the selling of offices, the getting of a *quid pro quo* for them. The French politicians, like our own, cannot be brought to look upon an office as anything more than a representative of value, received or to be received; to give it away, which is to them the only outcome of a reformed civil-service system, seems naturally a terrible waste of the raw material of "politics." When the spoils system made its way into the texture of American politics it had no traditions behind it; it was comparatively a parvenu, and any disposition on the part of democracy to drive it out again would leave no constitutional gap. But in France the traditions are all the other way. The political system is descended from that under which for centuries the open and universal sale of offices was a recognized part of the income of the Government, and under which, moreover, the spoils system was never confined to offices, as with us, but extended to the whole policy of Government and every other political interest. The results have been such as one would hardly venture to summarize in the case of a great and friendly nation like France. Those who have followed the direct and scarcely concealed dependence of the whole De Lesseps Panama scheme upon political "influence," and the manner in which press and politicians have treated economists who have endeavored to tell the truth about the affair, have no difficulty in understanding what is meant by a spoils system which goes beyond the mere matter of offices. The French voter apparently has no such difficulty; his difficulty is in finding a remedy. To attempt to extirpate the "principle" of the spoils system from its wide field would be to tear up the whole political system by the roots, as in the Nihilist programme, with no attempt to supply a substitute. The best the voter can do, then, is to make his vote the medium of some sort of protest until the class from which his representatives are usually chosen has learned greater political wisdom.

It cannot be doubted that this goal will be reached if democracy in France is given the necessary time and opportunity to release itself from the thralldom of tradition. For the Republic to seek a remedy in increase of centralization without any reform of political methods, in the intensification of Government control over elections, in decrease of the privilege of suffrage and of democracy, would be the policy of him who covers an incipient fire with new combustibles and goes away thinking that the danger is over.