

Aristocracy power
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Aristocracy has, now, come to signify that form of Government, in which the political power rests in the hands of a small section of the community.

But this is not the true test of Aristocracy. It is really Oligarchy, sometimes with implications of the corrupt few. The character of Aristocracy depends on the method of selection of the people who wield power, and the aims they keep in view, and not the smallness of the number.

The methods of selection are various and have been devised in accordance with certain leading ideas which had pervaded and still pervade society.

First, there is the idea of the importance of birth. In primitive society, families most directly descending from a common ancestor constituted a class by itself, in which outsiders were not admitted, except perhaps by adoption. In modern society we do not speak of a common ancestor, but we still defer to the notion that some families are better than others and consequently they are best fitted to rule.

In the second place, selection may be by merit, that is, persons of superior intellect and ability are chosen to govern others. This is Aristocracy of intellect. Selection by favour is another method. When a king confers high rank on those who serve him best, the method of selection is by favour.

Again, there may be an Aristocracy of wealth, when the criterion of selection is only the possession of riches. The poor, whatever is their intellect or merit, have no chance to assume public offices and participate in public affairs. It means, some are born to rule, if they happen to inherit wealth or amass it themselves, whereas others to be ruled, if the accident of birth or

circumstances do not make them so fortunate. Jellinek has laid emphasis on the social aspect of aristocracy.

He maintains that there is always some social class which wields the dominant power in the State. It may be the priestly class or military class or landed aristocracy. But whatever is the type, power will belong to that social class which is more powerful than the rest, and this class enjoys certain special privileges which are denied to other classes. Jellinek, accordingly, concludes that it is an error to define Aristocracy merely as a government by the few. Kinds of Aristocracy: Aristocracy for Aristotle was a normal form of government. Its perverted form was oligarchy, government by the few, that is, by the rich for the rich. Rousseau divided aristocracies into natural, elective and hereditary.

The general basis of classification had been: of wealth, of birth, of talent and intellect and of culture and education. Some writers have, during recent times, used the term " aristo-democracy" for aristocracy. Aristo-democracy means that only best types of men wield power.

In a sense, a democratic government is more or less aristocratic in that a considerable proportion of population takes no part in government and the greater share of the governing power is concentrated in the hands of a comparatively small number (the Theory of Elite). Public opinion is influenced, moulded and shaped by the leadership of the few. The majority party forms the government and its leaders man the administration. The majority party, together with the minority in the legislature, enacts laws. The masses simply elect their representatives and leave the rest to the actual

administrators till they are called upon to elect the rulers again. The line between Aristocracy and Democracy is, therefore, difficult to draw.

But it must be remembered that Aristocracy places no confidence in the ability of the masses. It is a government of the select few; may it be the “ aristocracy of breeding”, or “ aristocracy of intellect”, or “ aristocracy of talent.” Democracy has faith in the ability and capacity of man and its principle is equality. It accepts man as a man and provides equal opportunity to all to rise to the highest public office in the State.

Thus all persons who are fit to perform the duties of a citizen can have a share in the direction of the affairs of the State. Merits of Aristocracy: One of the great merits of Aristocracy is that it emphasises quality and not quantity. It assumes that some are better fitted to govern than others. They govern as they are the best and the criterion of their being best is the moral and intellectual superiority which they possess over others. “ It is the over lasting privilege,” says Carlyle, “ of the foolish to be governed by the wise.”

Aristocracy, thus, gives to the community a ruling class which can be trusted to administer public affairs with complete integrity and honour, because they possess a great position independent of politics. These individuals have powers of perception usually denied to others. They can see an order in human affairs and they can discern major trends that are obscure to the generality of their fellow citizens.

They rise above emotions and interests, and can see the meaning of justice and virtue in ways that others cannot. Aristocracy can also claim superiority over other forms of Government in respect of stability and efficiency, and,

thus, can maintain a consistent and vigorous policy both in domestic and foreign relations. John Stuart Mill says that “ the governments which have been remarkable in history for sustained ability and vigour in the conduct of affairs have generally been aristo-cracies.” It is further argued that Aristocracy would refrain from an unwise and immoderate use of power. Burke believed that the elite in a society would be more realistic than the common people. The aristocrat, he further said, has more of a sense of shame because he must ask himself what posterity will think of his actions; the anonymous citizen in a popular majority has no such thoughts.

Supporters of the “ aristocracy of breeding” defend hereditary aristocracy on the ground that genetic inheritance produces superior qualities in certain family lines. Having roots in their national tradition and being able to take a large-range perspective on the future, their approach to politics is conservative in the best sense. Political training runs in their blood and they take naturally to the business of government more efficiently and diligently. They represent a standard of perfection, derived from heredity and environment, and set a model for others to imitate as well as revere. Since members of this aristocracy have material security, they enter political life out of sheer sense of duty. They can, thus, promote the broader interests of society and do not have to pander to the momentary whims of a capricious electorate.

Aristocracy, it is claimed, is pre-eminently conservative. Since administration rests in the hands of the wise, talented and experienced administrators, who have inherited high traditions of public service, they would naturally avoid rash and radical political experiments Moreover, stability is one of the

foremost requirements of a good government and stability demands “ conservative innovation.” Violent changes involving suppression of institutions, which become venerable with age, agitate popular feeling and, as such, endanger the stability of government. “ It is, therefore, of the greatest importance in social and political progress that the principle of progress or liberalism should always be joined to the principle of stability or conservatism.” Aristocracy serves the desired purpose.

It allows only slow change and there is no complete break with the past.

Aristocracy is a reservoir which conserves experience and transmits wisdom to the present as well as to the future. Conservativeness and continuity are the two essential conditions of stability and Montesquieu said “ moderation” is the chief principle of Aristocracy. Cabinet Government is in essence Aristocracy. Those who constitute the Ministry are party leaders. According to Laski, the essential contribution of the Ministers to the Cabinet is “ their commonsense, their ability to put before their colleagues that judgment about decisions which public opinion, and especially party opinion, will make after they have been published.” This is Aristocracy tinged with responsibility. Modern governments have preserved the element of aristocracy in the composition of the Upper Chambers of their legislatures.

For instance, the British House of Lords consists primarily of hereditary peers. In countries where the Second Chambers are elected, the elections are usually so arranged as to make them representative of the best minds in the nation. The Council of States, the Second Chamber in India, consists of two hundred and fifty members, of whom twelve members are nominated by the President. The members nominated by the President are persons having

special knowledge or practical experience in respect of such matters as literature, science, art and social service.

This system of representation is aristocratic in the best sense. Weakness of Aristocracy: But the evil inherent in all kinds of Aristocracies is that they form a separate interest which is almost certain to come into conflict with the interests of the community. No wise and just principle has so far been devised for the selection of the ruling class, and no safeguard has been suggested to ensure that the few will rule in the interests of all and not for their selfish advantage. The privileged persons, who are destined to rule, form a class of vested interests and they look on their privileges as a matter of right which ought to be transmitted unimpaired to their successors. Even Aristocracy of the best soon degenerates into a class rule. Flushed with power and authority, they become arrogant and proud, and display towards the classes excluded from a share in the government, a harshness and cruelty which have been the more intolerable because accompanied by contempt. Even an aristocracy of intellect has no convincing appeal to make.

High intelligence is not the exclusive property of any single group, and rational individuals are distributed at random up and down the social scale. Of course, a person from a wealthy background stands a better chance of having his intellectual potentialities developed, for he will receive encouragement from his parents and the benefits of higher education. However, experience has shown that many of our finest intellects have sprung from humble surroundings and many of them have all but educated themselves. The rule of hereditary succession, " aristocracy of breeding", works evil as well as good.

When it has prevailed for a long time, a considerable number of hereditary dignities descend to persons quite unfit to exercise power or to make a good use of social influence. Moreover, the division of people into classes provokes envy and opposition. The rulers become narrow, selfish and domineering causing widespread disaffection and eventually rebellion. It is not rational to maintain and to put faith in the myth that some are born to rule and others to be ruled. Such a government is unresponsive and irresponsible, for it excludes the masses from finding interest in government.

They become only recipients of orders. Aristocracy, therefore, is exclusive. It does not offer the people political training or political consciousness, which is so essential for citizenship. It is a government for passive dumb-driven creatures and not for politically awakened and active citizens. Similarly, property, like birth, should not be the criterion for elevating a person to rule.

Governing power cannot be wisely restricted to persons who, either by accident of birth, are born in rich families or to whom some freak of fortune has brought riches. Such fortunate persons, when in power, devise all means, sane or insane, to perpetuate their own interests, reducing the masses to a pitiable plight. A great defect of aristocracy, says Bluntschli, is its excessive rigidity. A government which has reverence for long-established customs and traditions cannot have a dynamic outlook.

A good government must keep pace with the economic and social requirements of society. Aristocracy will resist all such changes in order to preserve its power. It is not a dynamic mechanism of government for the fulfillment of the needs of a dynamic man.

It cannot, therefore, serve the purpose of our times. It stands for backwardness. Finally, Aristocracy stands for pomp and splendour. All this grandeur and dignity entail huge expenditure and extravagance at the very high cost of public good.