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The three Scandinavian kingdoms

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THE union of monarchy and parliamentary democracy now regarded as particularly typical of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden came later to Scandinavia than is generally supposed. Monarchy in that part of Europe is almost as old as the State; parliamentary democracy was only established during the present century. Parliamentary rule means that those powers which legally belong to the monarch are, in fact, exercised by a Government issuing from and dependent for its survival upon Parliament; democracy means that political freedom is recognised and that the representative body, or its most important section, is elected by means of universal suffrage.

Sweden has the most varied and the most complicated constitutional history of the three Scandinavian kingdoms. Already during the fifteenth century it became usual for a Parliament (Riksdag) to be called in order to take important decisions together with the king; a certain division of power was apparent. Gradually there emerged in the Riksdag four estates—nobility, clergy, burghers (from the towns), and peasants. During the period when Sweden was a great European Power following the Thirty Years War there was for a time an absolute monarchy (1680-1718). After the defeat of Charles XII and the downfall of the Swedish Empire the trend went in the opposite direction. From 1720 to 1772 Sweden alone in Europe had a fully developed parliamentary system; the king had only one vote in the council, and members of the Government, apart from the king, were appointed by the Riksdag. Parliament, however, consisted as before of the four estates and, generally speaking, the nobles were the dominating group. In 1772 and 1789 there were revolutions, led by the king, leading to a new era of absolute monarchy, to be succeeded in 1809 by a system which divided power between king and Parliament.

The actual power of the king was gradually reduced during the nineteenth century, and the Riksdag became more but still not wholly democratic. In 1866 the four estates were abolished in favour of two Houses. But only in the twentieth century has the Riksdag—through reform bills carried in 1909 and 1918—become really democratically representative, and the parliamentary principle was only accepted by general opinion, also by the king, after the end of the First World War. In 1914 it was still possible for the king to declare himself as differing from the Government on an important question, thus forcing the Cabinet's resignation. And during that war the king had an important influence on Swedish policy.

In Denmark absolute monarchy was the predominant form of government until 1849, when a Riksdag with limited powers was established, elected by the richer, property-owning parts of the population. Gradually the power of the Riksdag increased. But from 1875 to 1894 it was still possible for a Government appointed by the king to govern in continuous opposition to the more democratic groups in the two Chambers of the Riksdag. The victory of the parliamentary system did not come until 1901; later Cabinets have, in principle, been the servants of Parliament and the king has given up his powers to take decisions. From 1915 the members of the two Houses of Parliament have been elected on the basis of universal suffrage.

Norway was for many centuries united with Denmark, until forced into a union with Sweden in 1814, although with a Constitution of her own. After long disputes between the Swedish-Norwegian king—he regarded himself in the first place as King of Sweden—and the Norwegian Parliament (Stortinget) the union was dissolved in 1905 as a consequence of Norwegian action. A referendum was held to decide the form of government. The result was an overwhelming majority for a monarchy. A Danish prince was elected king, and he accepted the parliamentary system from the start. Norway already had universal suffrage. Norway, therefore, has combined monarchy, parliamentary democracy, and universal suffrage for a somewhat longer period than the other Scandinavian countries.

The constitutional provisions of the three Scandinavian countries are in many respects similar. Only males can succeed to the throne—although Sweden had a famous queen, Christina, as early as the seventeenth century; in Denmark a proposal has just been made that females also should be able to reign. A Swedish rule that the right of succession is lost through marriage to a woman not of royal blood has had the result that no fewer than four princes out of five (belonging to the younger generation) have ceased to belong to the royal house.

The introduction of parliamentary democracy has not been confirmed through constitutional changes, but

only through recognised practice. Contrary to the British custom the monarch acts as chairman of the official meetings of the Government; formally he takes the decisions, while the Ministers act as advisers. Obviously these meetings—with decisions registered by minute—are, in practice, purely formal. In Sweden a Cabinet meeting usually takes only about an hour, during which hundreds of questions are decided. The real discussions between Ministers, and the negotiations between King and Ministers which may sometimes take place, are carried out outside the formal meetings prescribed by the Constitution.

There used to be in the Scandinavian countries active and fairly widespread republican movements. The Social Democrats, whose influence as a political party dates from about the turn of the century, demanded, in principle, a republic, and they received support from some liberal or radical groups. But the republican movement was mostly directed against a monarch with independent powers—for example, a monarch who was often an asset of the conservatives. It therefore lost intensity and weight as the parliamentary system gained. To-day no political party in Scandinavia conducts republican propaganda. In the Social Democratic (Labour) party, which is the biggest party in all three countries and has held office for long periods, it is sometimes said that republicanism in principle is the correct system; but, the argument runs, under present conditions there is no reason to pursue the matter. The monarchy as an institution has undoubtedly gained enormously in strength and respect through the victory of parliamentary democracy.

From this follow tendencies or consequences which cannot be ignored. The parliamentary system means that the monarch loses power but gains popularity. A king who acts independently creates opposition and ill will among groups—large or small—which do not like his actions. A king who is seen as a symbol of unity and as a legal bond between successive Cabinets will irritate nobody except people who want to exaggerate. His position makes him and the whole royal family a centre for that kind of interest and appreciation which expresses itself in idyllic descriptions of home life, pleasant pictures, and gossip. To the press the royal house is one of the greatest attractions and this reflects itself in increased circulation figures when there are royal weddings, funerals, and so on. If the king has any ability to mix with people he will create a personal loyalty which comes naturally from the socially inferior through the goodwill he shows. The politicians, who professionally attack each other and the other parties, will halt respectfully before the king who has a protected position just because he is politically inactive.

The popularity which is gained in this way carries in itself a potential political authority. To this it must be added that the ideology woven around the parliamentary monarch has a tendency to strengthen his position because of its unclear trend. It is said that the king is impartial, that he stands above the parties, that he represents the unity of the nation. This means, in the language of parliamentary democracy, that the king cannot or must not act politically. When you say that he is impartial you wish to say that he must not take up a particular position, and when he is declared to be above the parties the idea is that he should, without regard to his own opinion, act as a constitutional shield for the strongest party or parties. This interpretation of the usual slogans might easily be turned the other way round. Is not the man who is impartial the man best suited to act? Is not the man who is above parties really the best of all political leaders? In fact, the ideal parliamentary monarch can be described in much the same terms as those that might apply to the royal "leader" demanded by some modern monarchical movements. In particular situations it is conceivable that the propaganda for a neutral king, the king of a parliamentary democracy, could lead to propaganda for a king who acts independently.

It cannot be said that these dangers have reached importance in Scandinavia. During the Second World War, however, there were trends which illustrated the possibilities here mentioned. The kings became more than symbols for national unity and sticking together; their actions influenced many people, not least those who were politically indifferent or politically little interested. The fact that the Danish King took up an attitude which opposed the Germans who occupied the country became well known; he gained praise as a representative of the will of the people but he also influenced the people's attitude. The same is true of the King of Norway, who left Norway after the German attack and with his Government in London became a fortress of the resistance movement. In Sweden, which remained outside the war, there was a similar trend; much was talked and written about the old King as guarantor of the common sense of Sweden's peace policy. There is a remarkable example from the Russian-Finnish war of 1939-40. The Swedish Government announced that Sweden could not send armed forces to help Finland; later, the King came forward as a supporter of the Cabinet and publicly stated that he entirely shared the opinion of his Ministers.

Broadly speaking, however—and this must be said,—the Scandinavian monarchs have followed the rules of parliamentary democracy which were first formulated in England. When Governments have changed the king has endeavoured to get as successors Cabinets which have been parliamentarily as strong as possible; only in a few exceptional cases has the situation been so uncertain that the king's personal leanings may have been of some importance. Once the Government is formed the king may in some cases have acted as an adviser. To what extent the social prestige of the king, and the popularity he gains through intense publicity, give him opportunity to influence, informally, Ministers and civil servants it is difficult to say. The absence of detailed biographies and memoirs written by people with actual experience is one reason why, in the case of Scandinavia, a firm opinion cannot be given.