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THOUGHTS

ON

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM.

BY

JOHN STUART MILL.

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NEARLY the whole of this pamphlet, including the argument on the Ballot, was written five years ago, in anticipation of the Reform Bill of Lord Aberdeen's Government. The causes which at that period kept back the question itself prevented the publication of these remarks upon it. Subsequent reflection has only strengthened the opinions then expressed. They are now published, because it is at the present time, if ever, that their publication can have any chance of being useful.

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AT the interval of about a generation from the passing of the first Reform Act, by a sort of universal consent the Legislature is about to employ itself in enacting a second. This determination has been adopted in circumstances strikingly contrasted with those by which it is usual for constitutional changes to be ushered in, and, at least immediately, brought about. The change to which all are looking forward, has not been pressed upon the ruling powers by impetuous and formidable demonstrations of public sentiment, nor preceded by signs of wide-spread discontent with the working of the existing political institutions. It was thought a great thing that the Reform Bill of 1832 could be passed without an armed insurrection: to all appearance, that of 1859 will become law without having required, or occasioned, any unusual amount even of peaceful agitation. And this is the more noticeable, because there has been, at various times since 1832, much greater dissatisfaction than at present with public affairs; a much stronger sense of practical grievances, combined with a far greater amount of physical suffering which could, with more or less truth or plausibility, be traced to defects in institutions or in the social system. Yet at none of these times had any proposal of a further Parliamentary Reform the smallest chance of success; while now, every party in the State, and almost every individual politician of mark, is pledged to the support of some such measure. An alteration

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is to be made in the constitution of Parliament, rather because everybody sees such alteration to be right in itself, than because anybody either vehemently desires it, or is expecting from it any great or conspicuous practical result.

This state of things, so apparently anomalous, is one of the most satisfactory signs of the times, and a significant exemplification of the new character which has been permanently impressed upon the politics of this empire by the great popular triumph twenty-six years ago. The Reform Act, and the mustering and trial of strength between the Progressive and the Stationary forces which filled the fifteen years from 1832 to 1846, have inaugurated Improvement as the general law of public affairs: Improvement in itself, Improvement for its own sake, not such particular improvements only as any section of the public deems called for by its own immediate interest. And the result has confirmed the assertion always made by enlightened Radicals—that a government really inspired by a spirit of Improvement, a government under which there is a fair assurance that whatever in the laws or in their administration comes to be widely recognised as an evil, will be, by however gradual and cautious a process, corrected—satisfies the political cravings of the British people, and that they are not inclined to push for constitutional changes, further than as these may flow, by natural sequence, from the workings of a progressive government. Such reasonable assurance the British people now have: and the effect is, that while the love of improvement for itself, apart from its connexion with special or personal interests, has a much more positive existence in their minds than it ever had before, they have so full a reliance that anything which they recognise as an improvement will in time be obtained, that they seldom feel stirred up to demand it with loudness and importunity. This is the only explanation why Parliamentary Reform, though there seldom has been a time when there was less of clamorous demonstration in its behalf, is felt by the leaders of all parties, and all sections of opinion, to be a political necessity.

A constitutional reform brought forward in such circum-