THE PARLIAMENT OF THE PEOPLE

Not my words but echoes from the past?

For a long time this country of ours has lacked one of the institutions which freemen have always and everywhere held fundamental. For a long time there has been no sufficient opportunity of counsel among the people; no place and method of talk, of exchange of opinion, of parley. Communities have outgrown the folk-moot and the town-meeting. Congress, in accordance with the genius of the land, which asks for action and is impatient of words,—Congress has become an institution which does its work in the privacy of committee rooms and not on the floor of the Chamber; a body that makes laws,—a legislature; not a body that debates,—not a parliament. Party conventions afford little or no opportunity for discussion; platforms are privately manufactured and adopted with a whoop. It is partly because citizens have foregone the taking of counsel together that the unholy alliances of bosses and Big Business have been able to assume to govern for us.

I conceive it to be one of the needs of the hour to restore the processes of common counsel, and to substitute them for the processes of private arrangement which now determine the policies of cities, states, and nation. We must learn, we freemen, to meet, as our fathers did, somehow, somewhere, for consultation. There must be discussion and debate, in which all freely participate.

It must be candid debate, and it must have for its honest purpose the clearing up of questions and the establishing of the truth. Too much political discussion is not to honest purpose, but only for the confounding of an opponent. I am often reminded, when political debate gets warm and we begin to hope that the truth is making inroads on the reason of those who have denied it, of the way a debate in Virginia once seemed likely to end:

When I was a young man studying at Charlottesville, there were two factions in the Democratic party in the State of Virginia which were having a pretty hot contest with each other. In one of the counties one of these factions had practically no following at all. A man named Massey, one of its redoubtable debaters, though a little, slim, insignificant-looking person, sent a messenger up into this county and challenged the opposition to debate with him. They didn't quite like the idea, but they were too proud to decline, so they put up their best debater, a big, good-natured man whom everybody was familiar with as "Tom," and it was arranged that Massey should have the first hour and that Tom Whatever-his-name-was should succeed him the next hour. When the occasion came, Massey, with his characteristic shrewdness, began to get underneath the skins of the audience, and he hadn't made more than half his speech before it was evident that he was getting that hostile crowd with him; whereupon one of Tom's partisans in the back of the room, seeing how things were going, cried out: "Tom, call him a liar and make it a fight!"

Now, that kind of debate, that spirit in discussion, gets us nowhere. Our national affairs are too serious, they lie too close to the well-being of each one of us, to excuse our talking about

them except in earnestness and candor and a willingness to speak and listen with open minds. It is a misfortune that attends the party system that in the heat of a campaign partisan passions are so aroused that we cannot have frank discussion. Yet I am sure that I observe, and that all citizens must observe, an almost startling change in the temper of the people in this respect. The campaign just closed was markedly different from others that had preceded it in the degree to which party considerations were forgotten in the seriousness of the things we had to discuss as common citizens of an endangered country.

There is astir in the air of America something that I for one never saw before, never felt before. I have been going to political meetings all my life, though not all my life playing an immodestly conspicuous part in them; and there is a spirit in our political meetings now that I never saw before. It hasn't been very many years, let me say for example, that women attended political meetings. And women are attending political meetings now not simply because there is a woman question in politics; they are attending them because the modern political meeting is not like the political meeting of five or ten years ago. That was a mere ratification rally. That was a mere occasion for "whooping it up" for somebody. That was merely an occasion upon which one party was denounced unreasonably and the other was lauded unreasonably. No party has ever deserved quite the abuse that each party has got in turn, and nobody has ever deserved the praise that both parties have got in turn. The old political meeting was a wholly irrational performance; it was got together for the purpose of saying things that were chiefly not so and that were known by those who heard them not to be so, and were simply to be taken as a tonic in order to produce cheers.

But I am very much mistaken in the temper of my fellow-countrymen if the meetings I have seen in the last two years bear any resemblance to those older meetings. Men now get together in a political meeting in order to hear things of the deepest consequence discussed. And you will find almost as many Republicans in a Democratic meeting as you will find Democrats in a Republican meeting; the spirit of frank discussion, of common counsel, is abroad.

Good will it be for the country if the interest in public concerns manifested so widely and so sincerely be not suffered to expire with the election! Why should political debate go on only when somebody is to be elected? Why should it be confined to campaign time?

There is a movement on foot in which, in common with many men and women who love their country, I am greatly interested,—the movement to open the schoolhouse to the grown-up people in order that they may gather and talk over the affairs of the neighborhood and the state. There are schoolhouses all over the land which are not used by the teachers and children in the summer months, which are not used in the winter time in the evening for school purposes. These buildings belong to the public. Why not insist everywhere that they be used as places of discussion, such as of old took place in the town-meetings to which everybody went and where

every public officer was freely called to account? The schoolhouse, which belongs to all of us, is a natural place in which to gather to consult over our common affairs.

I was very much interested in the remark of a fellow-citizen of ours who had been born on the other side of the water. He said that not long ago he wandered into one of those neighborhood schoolhouse meetings, and there found himself among people who were discussing matters in which they were all interested; and when he came out he said to me: "I have been living in America now ten years, and to-night for the first time I saw America as I had imagined it to be. This gathering together of men of all sorts upon a perfect footing of equality to discuss frankly with one another what concerned them all,—that is what I dreamed America was."

That set me to thinking. He hadn't seen the America he had come to find until that night. Had he not felt like a neighbor? Had men not consulted him? He had felt like an outsider. Had there been no little circles in which public affairs were discussed?

You know that the great melting-pot of America, the place where we are all made Americans of, is the public school, where men of every race and of every origin and of every station in life send their children, or ought to send their children, and where, being mixed together, the youngsters are all infused with the American spirit and developed into American men and American women. When, in addition to sending our children to school to paid teachers, we go to school to one another in those same schoolhouses, then we shall begin more fully to realize than we ever have realized before what American life is. And let me tell you this, confidentially, that wherever you find school boards that object to opening the schoolhouses in the evening for public meetings of every proper sort, you had better look around for some politician who is objecting to it; because the thing that cures bad politics is talk by the neighbors. The thing that brings to light the concealed circumstances of our political life is the talk of the neighborhood; and if you can get the neighbors together, get them frankly to tell everything they know, then your politics, your ward politics, and your city politics, and your state politics, too, will be turned inside out,—in the way they ought to be. Because the chief difficulty our politics has suffered is that the inside didn't look like the outside. Nothing clears the air like frank discussion.

One of the valuable lessons of my life was due to the fact that at a comparatively early age in my experience as a public speaker I had the privilege of speaking in Cooper Union in New York. The audience in Cooper Union is made up of every kind of man and woman, from the poor devil who simply comes in to keep warm up to the man who has come in to take a serious part in the discussion of the evening. I want to tell you this, that in the questions that are asked there after the speech is over, the most penetrating questions that I have ever had addressed to me came from some of the men who were the least well-dressed in the audience, came from the plain fellows, came from the fellows whose muscle was daily up against the whole struggle of life. They asked questions which went to the heart of the business and put me to my mettle to

answer them. I felt as if those questions came as a voice out of life itself, not a voice out of any school less severe than the severe school of experience. And what I like about this social centre idea of the schoolhouse is that there is the place where the ordinary fellow is going to get his innings, going to ask his questions, going to express his opinions, going to convince those who do not realize the vigor of America that the vigor of America pulses in the blood of every true American, and that the only place he can find the true American is in this clearing-house of absolutely democratic opinion.

No one man understands the United States. I have met some gentlemen who professed they did. I have even met some business men who professed they held in their own single comprehension the business of the United States; but I am educated enough to know that they do not. Education has this useful effect, that it narrows of necessity the circles of one's egotism. No student knows his subject. The most he knows is where and how to find out the things he does not know with regard to it. That is also the position of a statesman. No statesman understands the whole country. He should make it his business to find out where he will get the information necessary to understand at least a part of it at a time when dealing with complex affairs. What we need is a universal revival of common counsel.

I have sometimes reflected on the lack of a body of public opinion in our cities, and once I contrasted the habits of the city man with those of the countryman in a way which got me into trouble. I described what a man in a city generally did when he got into a public vehicle or sat in a public place. He doesn't talk to anybody, but he plunges his head into a newspaper and presently experiences a reaction which he calls his opinion, but which is not an opinion at all, being merely the impression that a piece of news or an editorial has made upon him. He cannot be said to be participating in public opinion at all until he has laid his mind alongside the minds of his neighbors and discussed with them the incidents of the day and the tendencies of the time.

Where I got into trouble was, that I ventured on a comparison. I said that public opinion was not typified on the streets of a busy city, but was typified around the stove in a country store where men sat and probably chewed tobacco and spat into a sawdust box, and made up, before they got through, what was the neighborhood opinion both about persons and events; and then, inadvertently, I added this philosophical reflection, that, whatever might be said against the chewing of tobacco, this at least could be said for it: that it gave a man time to think between sentences. Ever since then I have been represented, particularly in the advertisements of tobacco firms, as in favor of the use of chewing tobacco!

The reason that some city men are not more catholic in their ideas is that they do not share the opinion of the country, and the reason that some countrymen are rustic is that they do not know the opinion of the city; they are both hampered by their limitations. I heard the other day of a woman who had lived all her life in a city and in an hotel. She made a first visit to the country last summer, and spent a week in a farmhouse. Asked afterward what had interested her most about her experience, she replied that it was hearing the farmer "page his cows!"

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A very urban point of view with regard to a common rustic occurrence, and yet that language showed the sharp, the inelastic limits of her thought. She was provincial in the extreme; she thought even more narrowly than in the terms of a city; she thought in the terms of an hotel. In proportion as we are confined within the walls of one hostelry or one city or one state, we are provincial. We can do nothing more to advance our country's welfare than to bring the various communities within the counsels of the nation. The real difficulty of our nation has been that not enough of us realized that the matters we discussed were matters of common concern. We have talked as if we had to serve now this part of the country and again that part, now this interest and again that interest; as if all interests were not linked together, provided we understood them and knew how they were related to one another.

If you would know what makes the great river as it nears the sea, you must travel up the stream. You must go up into the hills and back into the forests and see the little rivulets, the little streams, all gathering in hidden places to swell the great body of water in the channel. And so with the making of public opinion: Back in the country, on the farms, in the shops, in the hamlets, in the homes of cities, in the schoolhouses, where men get together and are frank and true with one another, there come trickling down the streams which are to make the mighty force of the river, the river which is to drive all the enterprises of human life as it sweeps on into the great common sea of humanity.

I feel nothing so much as the intensity of the common man. I can pick out in any audience the men who are at ease in their fortunes: they are seeing a public man go through his stunts. But there are in every crowd other men who are not doing that,—men who are listening as if they were waiting to hear if there were somebody who could speak the thing that is stirring in their own hearts and minds. It makes a man's heart ache to think that he cannot be sure that he is doing it for them; to wonder whether they are longing for something that he does not understand. He prays God that something will bring into his consciousness what is in theirs, so that the whole nation may feel at last released from its dumbness, feel at last that there is no invisible force holding it back from its goal, feel at last that there is hope and confidence and that the road may be trodden as if we were brothers, shoulder to shoulder, not asking each other anything about differences of class, not contesting for any selfish advance, but united in the common enterprise.

The burden that is upon the heart of every conscientious public man is the burden of the thought that perhaps he does not sufficiently comprehend the national life. For, as a matter of fact, no single man does comprehend it. The whole purpose of democracy is that we may hold counsel with one another, so as not to depend upon the understanding of one man, but to depend upon the counsel of all. For only as men are brought into counsel, and state their own needs and interests, can the general interests of a great people be compounded into a policy that will be suitable to all.

I have realized all my life, as a man connected with the tasks of education, that the chief use of education is to open the understanding to comprehend as many things as possible. That it

is not what a man knows,—for no man knows a great deal,—but what a man has upon his mind to find out; it is his ability to understand things, it is his connection with the great masses of men that makes him fit to speak for others,—and only that. I have associated with some of the gentlemen who are connected with the special interests of this country (and many of them are pretty fine men, I can tell you), but, fortunately for me, I have associated with a good many other persons besides; I have not confined my acquaintance to these interesting groups, and I can actually tell those gentlemen some things that they have not had time to find out. It has been my great good fortune not to have had my head buried in special undertakings, and, therefore, I have had an occasional look at the horizon. Moreover, I found out, a long time ago, fortunately for me, when I was a boy, that the United States did not consist of that part of it in which I lived. There was a time when I was a very narrow provincial, but happily the circumstances of my life made it necessary that I should go to a very distant part of the country, and I early found out what a very limited acquaintance I had with the United States, found out that the only thing that would give me any sense at all in discussing the affairs of the United States was to know as many parts of the United States as possible.

The men who have been ruling America must consent to let the majority into the game. We will no longer permit any system to go uncorrected which is based upon private understandings and expert testimony; we will not allow the few to continue to determine what the policy of the country is to be. It is a question of access to our own government. There are very few of us who have had any real access to the government. It ought to be a matter of common counsel; a matter of united counsel; a matter of mutual comprehension.

So, keep the air clear with constant discussion. Make every public servant feel that he is acting in the open and under scrutiny; and, above all things else, take these great fundamental questions of your lives with which political platforms concern themselves and search them through and through by every process of debate. Then we shall have a clear air in which we shall see our way to each kind of social betterment. When we have freed our government, when we have restored freedom of enterprise, when we have broken up the partnerships between money and power which now block us at every turn, then we shall see our way to accomplish all the handsome things which platforms promise in vain if they do not start at the point where stand the gates of liberty.

I am not afraid of the American people getting up and doing something. I am only afraid they will not; and when I hear a popular vote spoken of as mob government, I feel like telling the man who dares so to speak that he has no right to call himself an American. You cannot make a reckless, passionate force out of a body of sober people earning their living in a free country. Just picture to yourselves the voting population of this great land, from the sea to the far borders in the mountains, going calmly, man by man, to the polls, expressing its judgment about public affairs: is that your image of "a mob?"

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What is a mob? A mob is a body of men in hot contact with one another, moved by ungovernable passion to do a hasty thing that they will regret the next day. Do you see anything resembling a mob in that voting population of the countryside, men tramping over the mountains, men going to the general store up in the village, men moving in little talking groups to the corner grocery to cast their ballots,—is that your notion of a mob? Or is that your picture of a free, self-governing people? I am not afraid of the judgments so expressed, if you give men time to think, if you give them a clear conception of the things they are to vote for; because the deepest conviction and passion of my heart is that the common people, by which I mean all of us, are to be absolutely trusted.

So, at this opening of a new age, in this its day of unrest and discontent, it is our part to clear the air, to bring about common counsel; to set up the parliament of the people; to demonstrate that we are fighting no man, that we are trying to bring all men to understand one another; that we are not the friends of any class against any other class, but that our duty is to make classes understand one another. Our part is to lift so high the incomparable standards of the common interest and the common justice that all men with vision, all men with hope, all men with the convictions of America in their hearts, will crowd to that standard and a new day of achievement may come for the liberty which we love.

"The New Freedom", Woodrow Wilson, 1913

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