

Speeches of Robert M. La Follette

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Speech - "The Danger Threatening Representative Government"

Mineral Point, 1897. Robert M. La Follette Papers. Wisconsin Historical Society.

successfully assailed ~~us~~ by force of arms from without, but we shall be re-
reant to the trust committed to us, if we do not guard it as jeal-
ously from those within who would pervert its principles, pollute
or poison its fountain.

The basic principle of this government is the will of the
people. A system was devised by its founders which seemed to in-
sure the means of ascertaining that will ~~and of enacting it into~~
legislation & enforcing it. I have a hundred of the law.
~~law~~. This was to be accomplished by electing men to make, and men
to execute laws, who, would represent in the laws so made and exe-
cuted, the will of the people. This was the establishment of a
representative government, where every man had equal voice, equal
rights and equal responsibilities.

Have we such a government today? Or is this country fast
coming to be dominated by forces that threaten the true principle
of representative government?

I have no desire to stir your passions or invoke an unfair
judgment. But we owe it to the living as well as to the dead to
make honest answers to these questions.

Every thinking man must have been impressed with the unset-
tled restless condition of the public mind so marked for the last

few years. The cry of the discontented has sounded in the land again and again,--now almost dying away, now swelling in volume,--until men who consider beyond self and the hour, are asking: "Is there not some serious cause for it all?" It is not confined to the rabble swayed by the fiery harangue of the demagogue. It has enlisted the thought of thousands of honest men in every state of the Union. In search for something better you have seen this restless mass, this unsettled balance, swing states by thrity to sixty thousand, first into one political column and then into another; you have seen the people change the political policy of their national administration four times in the last twelve years, the national house of representatives change its political complexion with almost each recurring election.

What is it then that is swelling the ranks of the dissatisfied? Is it not a growing conviction in state after state, that we are fast being dominated by forces that thwart the will of the people and menace representative government?

Since the birth of this Republic, indeed almost within the last generation, a new and powerful factor has taken its place in our business, financial and political world and is there exercising a

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tremendous influence.

The existence of the corporation, as we have it with us today, was never dreamed of by the fathers. Until the more recent legislation, of which it is the product, the corporation was regarded as a purely public institution. The corporation of today has invaded every department of business and its powerful but invisible hand is felt in almost all the activities of life. From the control of great manufacturing plants to the running of bargain counters, from the operation of railways to the conduct of cheese factories, and from the management of each of these singly to the consolidation of many into one of gigantic proportions,--the corporation has practically acquired dominion over the business world. The effect of this change upon the American people is radical and rapid. The individual is fast disappearing as a business factor and in his stead is this new device, the modern corporation. I repeat, the influence of this change upon character cannot be overestimated. The business man at one time gave his individuality, stamped his mental and moral characteristics upon the business he conducted. He thought as much of bequeathing his business reputation to his son, as he did of bequeathing the business upon which

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that reputation had been so deeply impressed. This, made high moral attributes a positive essential in business life, and marked business character everywhere.

Today the business once transacted by ~~score~~ of individuals in every community is in the ^{Control} ~~group~~ of corporations, and many of the men who once conducted an independent business are gathered into the organization, and all personal identity, and all individuality lost. Each man has become a mere cog in one of the wheels of a complicated mechanism. It is the business of the corporation to get money. It exacts but one thing of its employes: Obedience to orders. It cares not about their relations to the community, the church, society, or the family. It wants full hours and faithful service, and when they die, wear out or are discharged, it quickly replaces them with new material. The corporation is a machine for making money, but it reduces men to the insignificance of mere numerical figures, as certainly as the private ranks of the regular army.

In the field of business competition many of the great corporations attack without principle and sooner or later fly the black flag for all competitors. This results logically from the

I do not wish to be misunderstood. The corporation, honestly operated in the function of a public servant and in certain lines as a business instrumentality purely, has an unlimited field of opportunity and usefulness in this country. As a public servant, as a business instrumentality, the corporation is everywhere,-- before the courts, in the legislature and at the bar of public opinion, entitled to the same measure of consideration, the same even-handed justice as the individual. I have the same contempt for the demagogue who assails a corporation solely because it is a corporation, that I have for the ready tool, who surrenders his conscience in its dishonest service.

When, ~~however~~^{whereas}, a corporation is used as a ~~substitute~~^{subterfuge} in crooked dealing, as an incubator of schemes, as a **shifty**, irresponsible competitor in private business, as a cover for combination in destruction of competition and restraint of trade, and as a **pernicious** political factor in the state and nation, it is to be ~~depreciated~~ and ought to be destroyed.

I am well aware that the combining of capital admits of operations upon a vast scale and may cheapen production in the long run, but we may pay too dearly even for cheap things, and we can-

not afford to exchange our independence, for anything on earth.

These corporations, not content with taking royal tribute daily from the private citizen, shift upon him the chief support of the government. The same disregard of the rights of others, and of all obligations to the state is shown in a determined resistance to bearing a just share of the burdens of taxation.

Corporations exacting large sums from the people of this state in profits, upon business transacted within its limits, either wholly escape taxation, or pay insignificantly in comparison with the average citizen of Wisconsin.

Last year,

The Pullman Palace Car Company	paid-----	\$552.66
" Wagner " " "	-----	746.48
" C. M. & Lake Shore Tel. Co. "	-----	232.00
" Western Union " " "	-----	10,000.05
" American Express Company "	-----	Nothing
" United States " " "	-----	"

These are but few examples. They serve however, to illustrate and illuminate the subject under discussion. Owning two-thirds of the personal property of the country, evading the payment of

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taxes wherever possible, the corporations throw almost the whole burden upon land, upon the little homes, and the personal property of the farms. This is a most serious matter, especially in the pinching times the people have suffered for the last few years. While this is coming to be somewhat understood yet a rigid investigation of this whole subject of the evasion of taxation by corporations and the possessors of great wealth in every state, would awaken the just wrath of the people and inaugurate a reform that might reach even the machine made legislatures of the day.

Among the older states, if these delinquents could be made to uncover their property for assessment, the personal property taxed would greatly exceed the real estate. But though the existence of laws enacted for their benefit and to allow evasion, the personal property returned by the assessor in New York is but 12% of the amount of real property returned: New Jersey but 17%: Massachusetts but 22%: Pennsylvania but 20%: Illinois but 17%, and Wisconsin but 24%.

The comptroller of the State of New York gives the total value of the taxable personal property in that state as more than twice the value of the real property and yet the amount assessed is but 12% of the amount of the realty assessed. Some idea of

all human feeling except the passion to get and the passion to keep.

"The spoil of the poor is in your houses: what mean ye that ye crush my people, and grind the face of the poor? saith the Lord."

God, how patient are Thy poor! These corporations and masters of manipulation in finance heaping up ^{great-} ~~golden~~ fortunes by a system of legalized extortion, and then exacting from the contributors,---to whom a little means so much,---a double share to guard the treasure!

This violation of law by the organizations of wealth and power and individual owners of fortune is but the sowing of the wind from which we must ultimately reap the whirl-wind. This wide spread perjury to avoid a just payment of taxes, prompted by the vice of greed is fraught with great danger to the Republic.

"Justice travels sometimes with leaden foot but she strikes with iron hand."

With wrongs begetting wrongs, until the wicken brood stings into desperation the millions now only discontented, is it not to be feared that they will strike back and strike hard?

by reference to the reasonableness of the contract on which they rest, their effect upon the public interest or the interest of those engaged in them, as shall place it within the power of the law and the courts to deal more effectively with those which are mischievous in their nature and tendency, than has been found possible hitherto."

So multifarious have become corporate affairs, so many concessions and privileges have been accorded them by legislation,—so many more are sought by further legislation,—that their specially retained representatives are either elected to office, directly in their interests, or maintained in perpetual lobby to serve them. Hence it is, that the ~~control of the corporation is~~^{does} not limited^{its operations} to the legitimate conduct of its business. Human nature is everywhere selfish, and with the vast power which consolidated capital can wield, with the utter impossibility of fixing any personal or moral responsibility for corporate acts, its commands are heard and obeyed in the capitals of the state and nation.

But in a government where the people are sovereign why are these things tolerated? Why are not the remedies promptly applied and the evils eradicated?

It is because today there is a force operating in this country more powerful than the sovereign in matters pertaining to official conduct.

The official obeys whom he serves. Nominated independently of the people, elected because there is no choice between candidate so nominated, the official feels responsibility to his master alone, and his master is the political machine of his party. The people whom he serves in theory, he may safely disobey; having the support of his political organization, he is sure of his re-election and knows he will be carried through the election, because his opponent will offer nothing better to the long suffering voter.

There are many notable exceptions to this class of officials, who stand out in these days of machine rule^{so} conspicuously as not to require mention.

Fellow citizens, I could have chosen a topic that would have given me much greater pleasure to discuss with you here today. But as we love our state and our country we cannot ignore the events that mark these days.

Recall, if you can, a session of a legislature in any state in the Union last winter which wholly escaped charges of scandalous

corruption. It will not do to say that such charges have always been made, because it would not be true. Such charges twenty-five years ago accompanied by legislative investigation retired the man to private life, no matter what report the committee made. Not so today. So greatly has the standard of official morality deteriorated that such charges have ceased to impress the public mind.

Within a few months you have seen our neighboring state almost in a condition of revolution,--an army of indignant citizens marching in a body on their capitol to save the great city of Chicago from the tyranny of ^a ~~the~~ street railway corporation,--and you saw the legislature indifferent to their arguments, their appeals, their threats, hand that proud city over to Yerkes, a bond slave for fifty years.

Why were these supposed servants of the people so arrogant and insulting to their constituents? It was because, under the existing caucus and convention system, as the candidates of the machines of their respective parties they felt secure of their places regardless of the will of the people.

Between the people and the representative there has been built up a political machine which is the master of both.

It is the outgrowth of the caucus and convention system. The plan of holding caucuses to select delegates to attend conventions, to select other delegates to go to nominating conventions, to nominate the candidates to be voted for by the respective parties, required of necessity a certain amount of organization, to bring these different bodies of citizens together. It soon became apparent to gentlemen of fortune and leisure that the organization required to arrange for the holding of caucuses and conventions might very easily extend its operation, and assist in conducting the caucus and convention, thus "relieving the delegates, dispatching business and enabling them to return to their homes and their individual concerns." And then it was but a short step to merge this organization into a perfect political machine which should run caucuses and conventions from start to finish, while the citizens, hopelessly struggled against or humbly bowed before this new power in representative government.

In the years of business prosperity which the country experienced with the development of the great Upper Mississippi valley men in every pursuit of life were engrossed with their individual affairs and left caucuses and conventions wholly to the politician. When finally the pressure of hard times and the multiplying abuses

in official life turn^{ed} their thoughts toward needed reforms in legislation, they awoke to find themselves the mere subjects of this new master, the political machine, which had come to be enthroned in American politics. They found it running their caucuses, naming their delegates, conducting their conventions, nominating the party candidates, making the party platform, controlling legislatures and state administration, and fooling a majority of the people year after year with plausible explanations through the columns of its own press.

Experience has proved it almost an idle folly to attend a caucus with the hope of defeating the machine until today,--after a century of statesmanship and struggle and sacrifice, after all the triumphs achieved under the stars and stripes,--thousands upon thousands of good citizens in every state, stand aloof from the caucus and convention with the settled belief that representative government is an unqualified failure.

Think of it! The citizen recognizing the supremacy of the machine and abandoning the contest; the official recognizing the supremacy of the machine and obeying its orders. What then have we left? It is the very life of a republic that the laws shall

be made and administered by those constitutionally chosen to represent the majority. Government by the political machine is without exception the rule of the minority. Who were the Illinois legislature representing when they passed the Gas Trust bill, when they passed the Allen-Humphrey bills? Who was Governor Tanner representing when he signed those bills and made them laws? Not ~~the~~ a majority of the people of Illinois, but the political machine, the silent partner for the time being of the gas trust and street railway company. Where was representative government in Illinois during those dark days?

How has it been in our own state during recent legislative sessions?

To the honest man in public life reputation is very dear, and no reflections upon the integrity of an official should be made unless the facts and the records justify it.

But to the man who loves his party, its statesmen and its history, who believes its principles essential to our highest prosperity, and aids in securing its supremacy,--its honor is his honor, its pledges are his pledges, and when these are betrayed by its representatives in offices, he is bound by every

When the solemn promise of a great political party to prohibit the issuing of these railroad passes to officials is not only broken, but attempted to be repudiated;--

When these things and many others of like character transpire and are made matters of public record, which no man can deny, then that man is untrue to his state, his party, and himself, who will not raise his voice in condemnation,--Not in condemnation of the principles of the political party in which he believes or of the great body of its organization, but of the men who betray it, and the methods by which they control, only to prostitute it to base and selfish ends.

When legislatures will boldly repudiate their constituents and violate the pledges of their platforms, then indeed have the servants become the masters, and the people ceased to be sovereign,--gone the government of equal rights and equal responsibilities, lost the jewel of constitutional liberty.

Do not look to such law makers to restrain corporations within proper limits. Do not look to such law makers to equalize the burden of taxation. Do not look to such law makers to lift politics out of the ways of darkness.

No, begin at the foundation, make one supreme effort,--even

under the present bad system,-- to secure a better set of law makers. Rally to the caucuses and conventions, each with the party in which he believes, secure one victory, if possible, over the machine, elect men who will pass a primary election law which will enable the voter to select the candidate of his choice without the intervention of caucuses or convention or the domination of the machine. Do this and your officers will ^orespond to public opinion. Do this and the reforms you seek will be within easy reach.

The way is open and the means at hand. Remember how money controlled elections before we adopted the Australian ballot. Then bullying and buying won the day at the polls. Now election day is as quiet as the Sabbath, and the election booth as respectable and orderly a place as any other in which citizens assemble. The political boss and the practical politician cried out against the Australian ballot as impracticable, theoretical, rot,--and in our own state I distinctly remember, demanded its repeal after one trial. But it had come, and come to stay, and no legislature would dare repeal the Cooper Law in Wisconsin today.

Here then is our remedy. Apply this same method to a primary

Provide that each man receiving the highest number of votes cast in the ballot box of his party for the office for which he is a candidate shall be the nominee of that party at the general election to follow.

Under this system you will destroy the machine, because you destroy the caucus and convention through which the machine controls party nominations. You will place the nominations directly in the hands of the people. You will restore to every state in the Union the government given to this people by the God of Nations.

Oh, men! think of the heroes who died to make this country free; think of their sons who died to keep it undivided upon the map of the world! Shall we, their children, basely surrender our birthright and say: "Representative government is a failure?" No, never, until Bunker Hill and Little Round Top, sink into the very earth.

Let us here today, under this flag we all love, hallowed by the memory of all that has been sacrificed for it and for us, dedicate ourselves to winning back the independence of this country, to emancipating this generation and throwing off from the neck of the freemen of America, the yoke of the political machine.