
POLITICAL REFORM

SPEECH AT THE CITY CLUB OF PHILADELPHIA, NOVEMBER 18, 1909. FROM THE CLOSE MANUSCRIPTS AT PRINCETON UNIVERSITY.

MR. WILSON'S theme was *Political Reform*. He said in substance:

Political reform is not with us in America any longer a question of motive, but a question of means. The desire for reform is everywhere manifest enough, and many thoughtful and energetic persons are devoting themselves to it with ardor and seriousness. But their efforts are resulting more often in failure than in success because, for some reason or other, they have not found methods which served their purposes or which they could perfect in such a way as to make their temporary success permanent. Our whole effort, therefore, should be, not to urge reform, but to master its method.

The *bête noire* of all the reformers is the "political machine," but the political machine cannot be put out of business unless a better machine is substituted for it or the use of machinery rendered practically unnecessary.

A better machine can hardly be found, if by a better machine we mean a more efficient means of controlling nominations and determining the operations of political authority. To set up a machine which would successfully rival an existing machine would necessitate the same minute attention to details, the same constant and diligent effort, the same thoroughness and efficiency of organization; and a rival machine as effective as the existing machine would in the long run be as dangerous and as susceptible of demoralization. Apparently,

therefore, the most promising course of reform is to dispense as nearly as possible with machinery and so put all machines out of commission.

The reason for the existence of a political machine is the elaborate political processes now necessary in the nomination and election of candidates for office. These processes are so elaborate as to need the skill of those who make their use a profession.

Our attacks upon the machine are for the most part futile because they ordinarily take the form of still further elaboration of process. We invent some new form of primary, we introduce the practice of the "initiative" and "referendum," we create the privilege of "recall," and before we are through we have given the voters so many things to do that they need the assistance of professional advisers in doing them, and can easily be outwitted by those very advisers in the very processes which were meant to free them from control.

The whole of the matter is clearly enough displayed in the circumstances of our ordinary elections. We give the voter so many persons to vote for that the ballot becomes a complicated thing which he has not time himself to prepare and which he cannot thoroughly understand after it has been prepared for him by the professional politician. It is very rare that a ballot put in the hands of the voter contains less than twenty-five names. One ballot that I have seen contained 700, was printed like a newspaper in compact columns, and was much larger than a single sheet of a newspaper. And the ballots devised even by ballot reformers throughout the country differ from this extraordinary ballot only in the number of names, which run from the scores to the hundreds. Of course, it is impossible for the ordinary voter to make discriminating choices among the multitude of names presented to him of persons unknown to him and about whom diligent inquiry will disclose very little. It would take a small volume to set before him the records of all the persons he is asked

to vote for, and he is helpless in the presence of the task set before him. If he tries to make nominations of his own, a single name of his own and his neighbours' suggesting will be lost amongst the multitude on the ballot; and if he tries to make up an entire "ticket," he will find himself daunted in a thousand ways by the difficulty of the undertaking.

It is plain that the way of reform lies in the direction of simplification. If the voter is to know what he is about, the number of persons he is to be called upon to vote for must be reduced to a minimum. When it is so reduced, both nomination and election will become direct, simple, and intelligible.

It cannot be a matter of accident that this very simplification in the process of election is characteristic of all the best governed cities in the world. A single example will serve as a type. The city of Glasgow is one of the best governed cities in the world. In it each voter is called upon to vote for only a single person, namely, the councilman from his ward. The Council thus made up from single member districts divides itself into as many committees as there are branches of the city government. Each committee is responsible to the Council for the entire conduct of the department assigned it, makes all appointments, and is in full charge of the business of its department. The morning papers record the votes of every member, whether in Council or at the meeting of his committee. It is a perfectly simple matter for every voter to follow his councilman at every point in the transaction of the public business. If he is dissatisfied with the action of his representative in the city government, he can easily gather a group of neighbours and put someone else in nomination. A perfectly simple contest can be made up between the candidates in the field, only one of whom is to be chosen. The issues of the contest are obvious, and the processes so direct as not to need the intervention of any machine whatever. No machine prepares a ticket, and no ma-

chine can confuse the voters in the processes of selection and election.

This simplification of process is necessary and feasible in every part of our representative system. It is particularly serviceable and particularly necessary in the government of our cities. I believe that the Short Ballot is the key to the whole question of the restoration of government by the people. Its salient principles are these: First, a governing body as small as is consistent with efficiency; second, full administrative responsibility lodged in that body; third, the election of that body by voters who are given only one or at most two persons to select for candidates and to vote for as officers.

It is to be feared that in many of the recent changes in the government of American cities the governing body has been made too small for efficiency. A commission of five persons, for example, is probably too small a body to master the details of the business of a considerable city. The body should be large enough to divide the work with sufficient minuteness to permit it to be easily mastered by those who are responsible, and the simplifying effect of a small body can be attained by reducing the number of members of that body to be voted for by each voter.

The effects of this simplification are direct and veritable representation of public opinion, unmistakable responsibility on the part of those chosen, and the destruction of all machines by the simple process of making the business of politics so simple that there is nothing that necessitates the existence of a machine.

Most Americans will remember a cartoon of Thomas Nast's, often reproduced. It represents the members of the old Tweed Ring in New York City standing in a circle. Each man has his thumb pointed at his neighbour, and the title of the drawing is "Twan't Me." The cartoon was a correct representation of American city government, which is so arranged by our complex char-

ters that each man connected with the government can very plausibly disclaim responsibility for any particular political action. We have invented a "Twan't Me" system of government and must reject it as soon as possible, must substitute for it a government of direct derivation from the people and of unmistakable responsibility, without making the very un-American mistake of setting up in place of a really representative body a too highly concentrated executive authority.