
Robert La Follette
“The Danger Threatening Representative Government”
July 4, 1897

[Note: Robert M. La Follette, Sr., gave this speech in Mineral Point, Wisconsin, to kick off a second (unsuccessful) bid to be nominated to run for governor of Wisconsin on the Republican ticket. (He finally won the nomination and the election in 1900, and he served as governor through 1905; he became a U. S. Senator in 1906.) In 1897, the nation was still recovering from a serious economic depression that struck in 1893. In this speech, La Follette called for a “primary election law” that would allow voters, rather than party “machines” (via caucuses and conventions), to choose who would appear on the ballot. His hope was that voters would be able to elect representatives that would be responsive to them rather than to corporate and personal interests. In 1904, Wisconsin became the first state to implement the progressive reform of the primary election. In the excerpt below (from a long speech), La Follette especially targeted the modern business corporation as a threat to representative government. –D. Voelker]

[1] The basic principal of this government is the will of the people. A system was devised by its founders which seemed to insure the means of ascertaining that will and of enacting it into legislation and supporting it through the administration of the law. This was to be accomplished by electing men to make, and men to execute the laws, who, would represent in the laws so made and executed the will of the people. This was the establishment of a representative government, where every man had equal voice, equal rights, and equal responsibilities.

[2] 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?

[3] Every thinking man must have been impressed with the unsettled restless condition of the public mind so marked for the last few years. . . .

[4] Since the birth of the 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 tremendous influence.

[5] The existence of the corporation, as we have it with us today, was never dreamed of by the [founding] fathers. . . .

[6] The corporation of today has invaded every department of business, and its powerful but invisible hand is felt in almost all activities of life. . . . The effect of this change upon the American people is radical and rapid.

[7] The individual is fast disappearing as a business factor and in his stead is this new device, the modern corporation. . . . 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. . . .

[8] Today the business once transacted by individuals in every community is in the control of corporations, and many of the men who once conducted an independent business are gathered into the organization, and all personal identity, and all individualities lost. . . .

[9] 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 cannot afford to exchange our independence for anything on earth. . . .

[10] 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 in Wisconsin. . . .

[11] Owning two thirds of the personal property of the country, evading payment of taxes wherever possible, the corporations throw almost the whole burden up on the 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. . . .

[12] God, how patient are Thy poor! These corporations and masters of manipulation in finance heaping up great 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! . . .

[13] 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 a perpetual lobby to serve them. Hence it is that the corporation does not limit its operations to the legitimate conduct of its business. Human nature everywhere is selfish, and with the vast power which consolidated capital can wield, with the 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.

[14] But in a government where the people are sovereign why are these things tolerated? Why are there no remedies promptly applied and the evils eradicated?

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

[16] The official obeys whom he serves. Nominated independently of the people, elected because there is no choice between candidates 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 renomination and knows he will be carried through the election, because his opponent will offer nothing better to the long suffering voter. . . .

[17] Between the people and the representatives there has been built up a political machine which is master of both. It is the outgrowth of the caucus and convention system. . . .

[18] 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 turned 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 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. . . .

[19] 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.

[20] Do not look to such lawmakers to restrain corporations within proper limits. Do not look to such lawmakers to equalize the burden of taxation. Do not look to such lawmakers to lift politics out of the ways of darkness.

[21] No, begin at the foundation, make one supreme effort,—even under the present bad system,—to secure a better set of lawmakers. 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 of the domination of the machine. Do this and your officers will respond to public opinion. Do this and the reforms you seek will be within easy reach . . .

[22] 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.

[23] 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.

SOURCE: “The Danger Threatening Representative Government,” Robert M. La Follette Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society; online at <<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/teachers/lessons/lafollette/pdfs/lfspeech.pdf>>.



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