

# THE WISCONSIN IDEA

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## INTRODUCTION

THANKS to the movement for genuinely democratic popular government which Senator La Follette led to overwhelming victory in Wisconsin, that state has become literally a laboratory for wise experimental legislation aiming to secure the social and political betterment of the people as a whole. Nothing is easier than to demand, on the stump, or in essays and editorials, the abolition of injustice and the securing to each man of his rights. But actually to accomplish practical and effective work along the line of such utterances is so hard that the average public man, and average public writer, have not even attempted it; and unfortunately too many of the men in public life who have seemed to attempt it have contented themselves with enacting legislation which, just because it made believe to do so much, in reality accomplished very little.

But in Wisconsin there has been a successful effort to redeem the promises by performances, and to reduce theories into practice. In consequence legislative leaders and reformers pushing legislation in other states write by the hundred to the men in power in Wisconsin asking for information on what has been done. Mr. McCarthy, the chief of the Legislative Reference Library of the Free Library Commission, has written this book primarily to answer such inquiries. His purpose is to

make the book of real service to good government, and this purpose, in my judgment, he has admirably fulfilled. It is a well reasoned and thoughtful exposition of how sane radicalism can be successfully applied in practice. His writings have nothing whatever in common with the mere hysterics out of which some well meaning, but not very efficient, radicals seem to get such curious mental satisfaction. Mr. McCarthy not only shows how Wisconsin has proceeded in specific instances to accomplish specific results, but he has so interwoven his studies of those separate results as to make the volume into a connected whole. Through his account of actual accomplishment in the field of political and industrial reform in Wisconsin, there runs a strain of philosophy that it would be well for every practical reformer to master. As Professor Simon N. Patten says: "Without means of attainment and measures of result an ideal becomes meaningless. The real idealist is a pragmatist and an economist. He demands measurable results and reaches them by means made available by economic efficiency. Only in this way is social progress possible." Mr. McCarthy's purpose is to impress not only every real reformer, but every capable politician, with the fact that the people are more concerned about "good works" than about "faith."

The Wisconsin reformers have accomplished the extraordinary results for which the whole nation owes them so much, primarily because they have not confined themselves to dreaming dreams and then to talking about them. They have had power to see the vision, of course; if they did not have in them the possibility

of seeing visions, they could accomplish nothing; but they have tried to make their ideals realizable, and then they have tried, with an extraordinary measure of success, actually to realize them. As soon as they decided that a certain object was desirable they at once set to work practically to study how to develop the constructive machinery through which it could be achieved. This is not an easy attitude to maintain. Yet every true reformer must maintain it. The true reformer must ever work in the spirit, and with the purpose, of that greatest of all democratic reformers, Abraham Lincoln. Therefore he must make up his mind that like Abraham Lincoln he will be assailed on the one side by the reactionary, and on the other by that type of bubble reformer who is only anxious to go to extremes, and who always gets angry when he is asked what practical results he can show. Mr. McCarthy emphasizes the lesson that cheap clap-trap does not pay, and that the true reformer must study hard and work patiently.

Moreover, Mr. McCarthy deserves especial praise for realizing that there is no one patent remedy for getting universal reform. He shows that a real reform movement must have many lines of development. Reformers, if they are to do well, must look both backward and forward; must be bold and yet must exercise prudence and caution in all they do. They must never fear to advance, and yet they must carefully plan how to advance, before they make the effort. They must carefully plan how and what they are to construct before they tear down what exists. The people must be given full power to make their action effective, and at the

same time the educational institutions of the commonwealth must be built up in such shape as to give the people the opportunity to learn how to use their power wisely. Nor must political reform stand by itself. It must accompany economic reform; and economic reform must have a twofold object; first to increase general prosperity, because unless there is such general prosperity no one will be well off; and, second, to secure a fair distribution of this prosperity, so that the man of the people shall share in it.

In short, this is a book which in my judgment every reformer, just at this time, should have in his hands. All through the Union we need to learn the Wisconsin lesson of scientific popular self-help, and of patient care in radical legislation. The American people have made up their minds that there is to be a change for the better in their political, their social, and their economic conditions; and the prime need of the present day is practically to develop the new machinery necessary for this new task. It is no easy matter actually to insure, instead of merely talking about, a measurable equality of opportunity for all men. It is no easy matter to make this Republic genuinely an industrial as well as a political democracy. It is no easy matter to secure justice for those who in the past have not received it, and at the same time to see that no injustice is meted out to others in the process. It is no easy matter to keep the balance level and make it evident that we have set our faces like flint against seeing this government turned into either government by a plutocracy, or government by a mob. It is no easy matter to give the public their

proper control over corporations and big business, and yet to prevent abuse of that control. Wisconsin has achieved a really remarkable success along each and every one of those lines of difficult endeavor. It is a great feat, which deserves in all its details the careful study of every true reformer; and Mr. McCarthy in this volume makes such study possible.