PROGRESSIVE DEMOCRACY

THE RIGHT OF THE PEOPLE TO RULE

EDITORIAL BY THEODORE ROOSEVELT

IN this and three or four succeeding articles I propose to restate in brief form the political and social philosophy which has led me, at the cost of lifelong political associations and personal friendships, to espouse the establishment of a new political party in this country. These articles repeat in essence the statement of my political faith made before the National Progressive Convention at Chicago this week.

The prime need of to-day is to face the fact that we are now in the midst of a great economic revolution. There is urgent necessity of applying both common sense and the highest ethical standards to this movement for better economic conditions among the mass of our people if we are to make it one of healthy evolution and not one of revolution. It is, from the standpoint of our country, wicked as well as foolish longer to refuse to face the real issues of the day. Only by so facing them can we go forward. If this country is really to go forward along the path of social and economic justice, there must be a new party of Nation-wide and non-sectional principles, a party in which the titular National chiefs and the real State leaders shall be in genuine accord, a party in whose counsels the people shall be supreme, a party that shall represent in the Nation and the several States alike the same cause—the cause of human rights and of governmental efficiency.

At present both the old parties are controlled by professional politicians in the interests of the privileged classes, and apparently each has set up as its idea of business and political development a government by financial despotism tempered by make-believe political assassination. The Democratic and Republican organizations alike represent government of the needy many by professional politicians in the interests of the rich few. This is class government, and class government of a peculiarly unwholesome kind. It seems to me, therefore, that the time is ripe for a genuine Progressive movement, Nation-wide and justice-loving, sprung from and responsible to the people themselves, and sundered by a great gulf from both of the old party organizations, while representing all that is best in the hopes, beliefs, and aspirations of the plain people who make up the immense majority of the rank and file of both the old parties.

The first essential in the Progressive programme is the right of the people to rule. It is said by those who object to the formation of a new party, that it is absurd to talk about the rule of the people, because, as a matter of fact, the people actually rule now.

But the actions of the political managers at the Republican Convention in Chicago, and to only a less degree at the Democratic Convention in Baltimore, have shown in striking fashion how little the people do rule under our present conditions.

We should provide by National laws for Presidential primaries. We should provide for the election of United States Senators by popular vote. We should provide for a short ballot, for nothing makes it harder for the people to control their public servants than to force them to vote for so many officials that they cannot really keep track of any one of them, so that each becomes indistinguishable in the crowd around him. . There must be stringent and efficient corrupt practices acts, applying to the primaries as well as the elections; and there should be publicity of campaign contributions during the campaign. We should provide throughout this Union for giving the people in every State the right and the means really and not merely nominally to control their public servants and their agencies for doing the public business; an incident of this is to give the people the right themselves to do this public business, if they find it impossible to get what they desire and need through the existing agencies.

I do not attempt to dogmatize as to the machinery by which this end shall be achieved. In each community it must be shaped so as to correspond, not merely with the need, but with the customs and ways of thought of that community; and no community has a right to dictate to any other in this matter.

But wherever representative government has in actual fact become non-representative, there the people should secure to themselves the initiative, the referendum, and the recall, doing it in such fashion as to make it evident that they do not intend to use these instrumentalities wantonly or frequently, but to hold them ready for use in order to correct the misdeeds or failures of the public servants when it has become evident that these misdeeds and failures cannot be corrected in ordinary and normal fashion. The administrative officer should be given full power, for otherwise he cannot do well the people's work; but he should be controlled by giving the people full power over him.

I do not mean that we shall abandon representative government; on the contrary, I mean that we shall devise methods by which our Government shall become really representative. To use such measures as the initiative, referendum, and recall indiscriminately and promiscuously on all kinds of occasions would undoubtedly cause disaster; but events have shown that at present our institutions are not representative—at any rate, in many States and sometimes in the Nation—and that we cannot wisely afford to let this condition of things remain longer uncorrected. We have permitted the growing up of a breed of politicians who, sometimes for improper political purposes, sometimes as a means of serving the great special interests of privilege which stand behind them, twist so-called representative institutions into a means of thwarting instead of expressing the deliberate and well-thought-out judgment of the people as a whole. This cannot be permitted any longer.

We choose our representatives for two purposes: first, that as experts they shall study certain matters with which we cannot be intimately acquainted; and, second, to carry out certain policies with regard to these matters as to which we, the people, consulting them as expert advisers, have definitely made up our mind. As experts, they have the right and duty to advise us, and if they are the right kind of experts we shall generally follow that advice; but as representatives we, the people, have the right to expect and to compel them to represent us by doing what we have decided ought to be done. All I desire to do by securing more direct control of the governmental agents of the people is to give the people the chance to make their representatives really represent them whenever the Government begins to be misrepresentative instead of representative.

I have not come to this way of thinking from closet study or as a mere matter of theory; I have been forced to it by a long experience with the actual conditions of our political life. A few years ago there was very little demand in this country for Presidential primaries; there is a very widespread demand now, because the professional politicians have sometimes failed to carry out the will of the people and have sometimes successfully endeavored even to thwart it as regards nominations for President. It is a matter of fact and not a matter of theory, with which almost every voter is familiar in his own experience and in his own community, that this class of professional politicians habitually and unhesitatingly resort to every species of mean swindling and cheating in order to carry their point. It is because of the general recog-

nition of this fact that the words "politics" and "politicians" have grown to have a sinister meaning throughout this country.

As an example of the methods employed by this class of professional politicians, I refer to the Republican National Convention at Chicago. In the contest which culminated at that Convention I was the candidate of the Progressive wing of the party. I speedily found that my chance was at a minimum in any States where I was prevented by the "bosses" from getting an expression of the people themselves in the primaries. I found that if I could appeal to the rank and file of the Republican voters I could generally win; whereas if I had to appeal to the political caste—which includes the most noisy defenders of the old system—I generally lost. It is instructive to compare the votes of States where there were open primaries and the votes of States where there were not. In Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Ohio we had direct primaries, and the Taft machine was beaten two to one. Between and bordering on these States were Michigan, Indiana, and Kentucky. In these States we could not get direct primaries, and the "bosses" elected two delegates to our one. In the first three States the contests were absolutely open, absolutely honest; the rank and file expressed their wishes and there was no taint of fraud about what they did. In the other three States the contest was marked by every species of political trickery and sometimes even by violence on the part of the "bosses," and half the Taft delegates from Michigan, Indiana, and Kentucky had tainted titles. The nomination of Mr. Taft at Chicago was obtained only by preventing the rank and file of the party from exercising their right to express their choice.

What the National Committee and the boss-made majority of the National Republican Convention did at Chicago in misrepresenting the people has been done again and again by both parties in Congress—especially in the Senate—and by both parties in the State Legislatures. Again and again laws demanded by the people have been refused to the people because the representatives of the people misrepresented them.

The fundamental proposal of the National Progressive party—a proposal which I accept, which I shall maintain with every legitimate power at my command, and from which neither calumny nor the loss of friends nor prophecies of failure shall divert me—is that the people have the right and shall be given the power to see to it themselves that the governmental action taken in their name is really the action they desire, that this Government shall be in reality, in common everyday life, a Government of the people, by the people, for the people.