

**Excerpts from Robert M. LaFollette's speech -
"The Danger Threatening Representative Government"**

. . . The basic principle 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.

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 judgement. But we owe it to the living as well as the dead to make honest answers to these questions.

Every thinking man must have been impressed with the unsettled restless condition of the public mind so marked for the last few years . . . What is it that is swelling the ranks of the dissatisfied? Is it 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 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.

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

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 businessman at one time gave his individuality, stamped his mental and moral characteristics upon the business he conducted . . .

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 . . .

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 pay too dearly even for cheap things, and we cannot afford to exchange our independence for anything on earth . . .

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. . .

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 . . .

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!

. . . 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.

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?

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

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. . . .

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 . . . Not so today. So greatly has the standard of official morality deteriorated that such charges have ceased to impress the public mind.

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. . .

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.

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 recognized the supremacy of the machine and abandoning the contest, the official recognizing the supremacy of the machine 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. . .

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 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.

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 sell 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 . . .

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.

Discussion and Reading Questions for “ The Danger Threatening Representative Government Speech.”

1. What did Robert M. La Follette blame for the crisis in democracy? What do you think he meant when he stated “the official obeys whom he serves?”
2. La Follette asked the question “What is it that is swelling the ranks of the dissatisfied?” Consult your history textbooks and identify at least three examples of the social unrest that La Follette is alluding to.
3. Define “the machine.”
4. Identify any historical references made by La Follette in this speech. In which sections of the speech are they used? Considered one of the great orators of his generation, why do you think La Follette employed history in his speeches?
5. How did La Follette propose to solve the crisis in democracy?
6. Compare and contrast Robert M. La Follette’s views with other national political leaders from this era, such as William Jennings Bryan, or Theodore Roosevelt.
7. Are any of the concerns expressed by La Follette analogous to issues in American society today? Explain.