Robert M. La Follette

Robert La Follette developed his fierce opposition to corporate power and political corruption as a young man. Affiliated with the Republican Party for almost his entire career, La Follette embarked on a political path that would take him to Congress, the governorship of Wisconsin, and the U.S. Senate. His support for progressive reforms, rousing oratory, and frequent clashes with party leaders earned him the nickname “Fighting Bob.”

Born in Primrose township, Dane County, in 1855, La Follette worked as a farm laborer before entering the University of Wisconsin in 1875. After graduating in 1879, La Follette launched his political career as district attorney the following year. Elected to Congress in 1884, La Follette was defeated in 1890 by Democrat Allen Bushnell. While for some people a defeat might have signaled the end of a political career, for La Follette it marked the beginning of a lifelong fight for political reform.

La Follette's career as a reformer began in earnest a few months later when the state Republican leader, Senator Philetus Sawyer, offered him a bribe to fix a court case against several former state officials. Furious that Sawyer would try to use money to influence the legal system, La Follette refused the bribe, angrily denouncing the use of money to shut out the voice of the people. For nearly ten years, La Follette traveled around the state speaking out against the influence of crooked politicians and the powerful lumber barons and railroad interests that dominated his own party. Elected governor in 1900, La Follette pledged to institute his own form of political reform.

Until that time, the candidates whose names appeared on ballots were selected by party leaders in private caucuses. Drawing on the ideas of other reformers to make politics more democratic, La Follette successfully pushed the legislature to pass measures instituting direct primary elections, which gave voters the right to choose their own candidates for office. He supported measures that doubled the taxes on the railroads, broke up monopolies, preserved the state's forests, protected workers' rights, defended small farmers, and regulated lobbying to end patronage politics. La Follette worked closely with professors from the University of Wisconsin to help the state become "a laboratory of democracy." By the time he joined the U.S. Senate in 1906, La Follette had become a national figure.

Excerpts of a speech, "The Danger Threatening Representative Government," delivered on July 4, 1897.

Source: Robert M. La Follette Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Archives Division

... 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 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 judgment. 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 not 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 therefore exercises 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 it's powerful but invisible hand is felt in almost all the 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 business man at one time gave his individuality, stamped his mental and moral characteristics upon the business he conducted ... .

Today the business once contracted 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 ...
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 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 . . .

But in a government where the people are sovereign why are these things tolerated? Why are no the 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 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 recognizing the supremacy of the machine and abandoning the contest, the official recognizing the supremacy of the machine and 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 . . .

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, secures one victory, if possible, over the machine, elects men who will pass a primary election law which will enable the voter to sell the candidate of their choice without the intervention of caucuses or convention or 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 . . .

Let us here to day 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.