

A POLITICAL PROGRAM FOR DEMOCRACY
BY
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I appreciate your invitation to participate in this stimulating forum, to speak on the very important subject of the political program for our democracy. Tonight I use the term "political" as a descriptive term for the mechanics of decision making by government.

Professor Rogers has given us a good, succinct statement of the conditions that confront us in America as we attempt political reform. He lists "federalism, localism, and seniority" as formidable facts of our polity to be reckoned with. I agree. These conditions are obstacles to effective political leadership in this country.

The conduct of public affairs in these crucial days calls for positive direction and responsibility if we are to achieve the promises of the American life at home, and safeguard democracy in the world at large. What we seek, within the framework of our inherited form of government, is a series of arrangements which will at once promote better teamwork between the Congress and the President, avoid dangerous deadlocks, inculcate national rather than provincial loyalties, and give the spirit of youth a larger place in legislative halls.

Ours is a federal system in constitutional theory, but it is increasingly becoming a national system in actual practice. While we have 48 state legislatures, we have one national economic and industrial system. The trend from state government to national government has been fortified and accelerated by the Civil War, by the onward sweep of science and technology, by the unifying forces of transportation and communication, and by a long series of Supreme Court decisions. The same evolutionary influences are operating in our political system. There are still lags here and there, particularly in the South, but state bosses and local party machines are slipping, as in Jersey City, Kansas City and Virginia while national party organizations gain force and strength. The American people recognize the interdependence of our economy. They sense the necessity for broad national policy. Adequate testimony to this trend of American politics is found in the wide-scale activity of a host of educational, social and political organizations. This is a healthy trend, and one that is helping to dissolve the traditional sectional divisions and political alignments of the American people.

One of the articles of our political faith has been our belief in the bi-party system. We believe that political parties are the principal instruments of democratic government and that the party which wins a majority of the popular vote should have the responsibility and the power to govern the country.

The major party is the only political organization in American life which is in a position to claim that it can measure up to the requirements of modern public policy. It has sought and won a general control of the government. It alone possesses the kind of political organization required to make government work. It alone may reasonably be held responsible for the general state of public policy. Of all the varieties of political organization, it alone gets a mandate from the people to govern the country. Party government is therefore as right as democracy itself. The American people have long accepted the principle of party responsibility for the conduct of our national government. We must translate that principle into practice.

But why has the American party system not yet produced that fullness of authority which is necessary to make the government work without recurring deadlocks and without lag, leak and friction?

Obstacles to Party Responsibility

There are several explanations. The federal structure, our inherited system of separated powers, and the piecemeal practices of American government create formidable obstacles to effective government. Part of the explanation is to be found in the deep internal divisions within the majority party. Like the Republican Party, the Democratic Party has both conservative and liberal members who wear the same party emblem, but lack a common political philosophy.

Another contributing cause is the influence of special and sectional interests which receive a loyalty that transcends a sense of responsibility to the

national interest, as in the tidelands oil controversy. The part is often valued above the whole; the district above the state; the state above the nation.

Furthermore, legislative procedure, especially in the United States Senate, is such as to give every advantage to the tactics of obstruction by individual members and minority blocs. The choice of committee chairmen by seniority rather than party regularity, and the unrepresentative character of the congressional committees are also part of the explanation. The fact that Senators and Representatives are responsible to state and local electorates, while the President is responsible to a national electorate, presents a basic difficulty of our system.

I have been a member of the United States Senate for ten months - not long enough to become indoctrinated and reconciled to the ancient ways of that body - but long enough to have observed a fundamental obstacle to effective party government in Congress. I refer to the diffusion of party responsibility for legislative action in both houses among a variety of political mechanisms.

I had not long been a member of the Senate before I made two discoveries: (1) that there are 28 stages in the enactment of a law and at each stage on the legislative highway a few legislators can lurk, like the pirates of Tripoli, and take toll of the passing traffic; and (2) that the power structure of Congress has been so constructed over the passing years that the control of legislative action in both chambers is scattered and splintered so that effective party leadership is almost impossible to achieve.

Before the so-called Congressional "revolution of 1910", control of the House of Representatives was in the party caucus, practically the only organ in Congress for formulating the party will. The Speaker was the only agency for carrying out the party will. The caucus selected the party's candidates for office in the chamber and formulated and enforced the party's will with respect to legislative action. Decisions reached in caucus were binding upon the entire membership of the party. Caucus decisions of the majority party determined the action of the Congress itself. Thus, the line of party responsibility ran straight from the electorate through the majority caucus to the party leadership in Congress.

This type of party government existed in Congress during the first administration of President Wilson. The success he had during his administration, in having Congress adopt the greater part of his legislative program, has always been considered one of his great achievements. Undoubtedly he deserved credit for the masterly way in which he held together and led the Democratic Party. But the real credit for this achievement is due to the effective way in which the Democratic Party made use of its caucuses in both houses of Congress. To an extent never equalled before or since, that administration adopted the policy of having all major legislative proposals first considered in caucus, and of binding its members to abide by the action of the caucus. As a result, differences were resolved and a majority vote was assured when they were taken up for consideration.

Contrast that situation with the conditions of today. The caucus has become a "conference". Little attempt is made to unite the party membership and hold them responsible to vote for measures designed to carry out platform pledges. The powers formerly concentrated in responsible party leadership are now split up in both chambers and both parties among the committees on committees, the steering or policy committees, the floor leaders and the party whips.

The function of leadership has been transferred from the Chair to the Floor. The power of direction was broken up and diffused among a number of agencies: the appointing power was given to the committee on committees, the strategy function to the steering or policy committee, and the tactical function to the floor leader.

Moreover, the standing committees of Congress exercise large powers over legislation. They have the very important power of determining the whole agenda of the two houses, by the rule which provides that all bills and resolutions, immediately upon their introduction, shall be referred to the appropriate standing committees for consideration and report. By this rule the House and Senate have declared that they will refrain from the consideration of any bill or resolution until it has been examined by its proper committee and has been reported back to the House or Senate with recommendations for action.

This rule gives great power to the committees because (1) it does not require them to consider or report back bills referred to them; and (2) in practice, only those bills are reported back which the committees favor. Thus, the DP bill and

the D.C. home rule bill were pigeon-holed in committee for several months, despite party promises to pass them. In short, each committee, acting within its own jurisdiction, is almost sovereign with respect to the determination of the bills that shall come before the two chambers for action. And their chairmen are immune to party discipline.

The standing committees also play a dominant part in controlling and directing proceedings on the floor when their bills are under consideration. This dominance is partly the result of formal rules and partly that of conventions which have acquired the force of written rules.

The long-standing custom of unlimited and irrelevant debate in the Senate is an additional heavy handicap to effective party leadership and political performance in the upper chamber.

Thus, the dispersion of political responsibility in Congress, together with its archaic rules and customs, go far in my opinion to explain its repeated difficulties, regardless of which party is in control, in translating the will of the people into public policy. The party leadership is not to blame. Who can lead where others will not follow?

A Democratic Solution

There is a growing recognition among political leaders of the need of a more responsible and effective party system in the United States. Various proposals to this end are being advanced. In a forthcoming report a committee of the American Political Science Association crystallizes informed opinion on the means of strengthening party government. Their recommendations impress me as constructive, and worthy of wide consideration.

I have time here only to outline the steps which might well be taken toward the new party system. They are three-fold:

First, I believe that we must try to integrate party membership and keep that membership at all levels informed through the discussions of party policy and the development of explicit party programs. Each party should be encouraged to reformulate its platform every two years, - it might be that National Conventions should be held every two years, - and the platform should be regarded as commitments by all candidates for office and office holders of the party. This would go far to make our congressional elections, as well as our Presidential elections, more meaningful to the American people by providing them with an opportunity effectively to choose on basic issues rather than personalities. American politics should not be a beauty contest or a popularity contest. Policy and issues must be the standards for decisions. Party elections must increasingly become issue elections, otherwise more and more people may lose faith in representative government and become impatient with democratic processes. Despite platform pledges, for three decades now civil rights bills have been repeatedly defeated in the Senate by various parliamentary strategies.

Second, our political parties must become more responsible to the American people and to their own membership. I believe we must reinvigorate party leadership at the national level by making that leadership more representative of the people. This can be accomplished only as the local and state political organizations more truly represent a broad cross-section of the electorate. This means politics becomes the business of the people, not the special privilege of the professionals. Then too, party research and education are the political vitamins that ensure strength and continuity to a political program. With an educated and informed party membership, party platforms on a national level will increasingly come to represent policy decisions made on the local level. It should be the function of the local party membership to express itself on national issues not only by choosing delegates to national conventions, but by making on a local level decisions on national issues which their representatives are to carry forward to the national convention. Party membership would come to feel that its views and decisions on policy matters have an effect on national party policy decision, and would be an alert and active and responsible membership.

Third, I believe that we must reorganize and modernize the machinery of party responsibility in Congress. This step calls for a number of subsidiary steps, none of which seems to me to be beyond the realm of practical politics, and seem worthy of further consideration and discussion.

- 1) We should revive and make more extensive use of the caucus as an instrument for the formation and promotion of party policy.

- 2) A joint Congressional Policy Committee for both houses of Congress should be created. It should be the function of this joint Congressional Policy Committee to plan legislative strategy and programs, and to be held responsible for the legislative implementation of party policy.
- 3) The Party Policy Committees should be allocated the function of making standing committee assignments. The Party Policy Committees, or the membership of each committee, might well be allocated the function of selecting the standing committee chairman. Seniority is the most "sacred cow" in the legislative zoo, but it is not imbedded in the body of the constitution nor the statutes. It is a custom that can be changed in party caucus.

Twentieth century America is a dynamic society facing complex problems. Our task is to evolve a political mechanism which will utilize the democratic process, place responsibility for action, and maintain an unobstructed connection between the electorate and the elected representatives in government.



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