Manuscript: Public Questions - Pen & Brush

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Public Questions - P. & B.

We hear a good deal of irritated criticism at times on the so-called keeping up checks and balances which the United States scheme of running things provide. Those who are eager for a change which they consider an improvement, a reform, hate the checks which come from a necessity to submit the bill, if bill it be, to both Houses of Congress; to force it to be reviewed by all kinds of minds, to submit it to the test of the situation, not only to the group the proposer represents but to all groups in the country - how it will affect everybody not merely the group that you have in mind and that you know. This pours cold water on grand schemes for quick regeneration.

And then there is that extraordinary and often fatal check of the Supreme Court. What seems to be right and just must be submitted to the Supreme Court and we talk tempestuously about those doddering old men. But take the Supreme Court's history and you will find that it has been steadily corrective in its decision, and progressive, that it considers more wisely than any other body that we have the way the thing will effect general welfare. If it is conservative in preserving the foundation of things, and the building and re-building on top of what we still consider the firm foundation, these taxes and should work out very interestingly in a system like ours where the individual is supposed to have the right of expression, the right of assembly, of organizing for the thing in which he believes. An interesting example
has just come to my attention. You have noticed, no doubt, the government in the operations of the New Deal adopted not long ago what was called the National Housing Act. There are a good many other things in the New Deal. Those of us who saw the possible good of the Housing Act looked on it as something as entirely new in the economic pride of the country. The Government was going to help people, not only to carry the mortgages on homes and farms that they had, but it was going to help them to build.

If you will examine the New Deal you will find that there is no device in it and no machinery which has not already for many years been attempted. It is the objective and even to a degree the machinery of groups of what we call forward looking people. Now the objectives of this new organization have been the objectives of certain groups of friends of mine for sometime. It must be at least five years ago that my attention was called to the Home Owners Protective Enterprise. That Home Owners Protective Enterprise had been long at work trying to do certain things that the new Housing Act had in mind, but there were certain things in the government enterprise that the private enterprises took sharp exception to, such as -

(See Obenauf attached - outline)

Now this is an example of what goes on all the time in a country where you have the right to assembly, the right to speak. You get an intensive criticism that you never get in the best conceived schemes - predatory practice in mind.

Predatory practice is held back in social and political affairs
because whatever is done must fit in with the scheme.

Now of course this freedom, and here we are seeing the effects of it and have been for many years, this freedom of speech, this freedom of economic activity leads to the abuses which are on hand in the defective nature, we will say, of men. If you allow any such scheme as ours to work, men free giving men religion, economic freedom to act, you are going to have religion strange outbreaks of superstition, mysticism, fanaticism and you have in intellectual life mechanisms not based on facts, but based on what we would like to have. Economically you are going to have structures in which greed and exploitation rule because giving men their freedom economically you do not know which are motivated by unselfish prejudices and those motivated by the opposite. In order to get the full benefit of one of the fundamental things in human nature which we call initiating, and which you only get when the man has freedom to act, you get to work the initiative of the evil as well as of the good.

And here is where the checks must end. In our society we depend a great deal on public opinion. The American scheme has depended from the start on what people thought to correct, and people as a rule judge correctly, that is there has been a check on evil doers. It has been difficult when this thing went to an extreme to crystallize your check into law; but laws have to come in when a thing does not cure itself to force change. We have been in a continual process of forcing changes in this country by law of the Interstate
Commerce Bill. Now what we did there with the railroad we are now attempting to do after talking a long time about it, with securities. The abuses are so flagrant, so gross, they certainly were in the case of the railroad. Here comes in and distortion of public opinion of these abuses and the suffering they cause. We are very apt to jump to the conclusion that the whole thing is rotten and must be scrapped and another system tried which will produce no rottenness.

Well, if you can get any system that will not produce rottenness and exploitation you will do more than the world has yet been able to accomplish. Basically the trouble is, I think, and this is the trouble I feel pretty sure has been overlooked in this country largely since the Civil War, the failure of sound ethics and sound humanity. When I talk about ethics I am not talking about morality in the sense of customs, I am talking about the ethics in the sense of the fundamental consideration for the other fellow, of fidelity to the truth of a thing as you see it. The other fellow that you exploit economically for personal advantage has little or no place. Written beyond belief has been the indifference to those injured in many great exploitations; but as a matter of fact if you take it in a general appraisement in all our great materialistic enterprises, such as the opening of the country by railroads, the development of rapid communication by means of telegraph and telephone, the growing development of the electrical service with its larger and larger ideas, always the general aim has been to reach and serve everybody.
The railroads from the start when it was seen what
the railroad was and what it could do was to get it to everybody's
farm. Now taking the country as big as this it was some
mechanical and financial job. But consider what it has done
and how it has served, and financially served. Because railroad
stocks are depressed at the moment is not saying that they are
not good properties and if anybody has patience they better
hold on to anything and anyone of our great systems. Remember
the railroad has come to a point of regulation for such
amazing predatory rage as we saw in earlier days - the days of
Jay Gould and Jim Fisk and Daniel Drew, those of later days -
in the '90's. Those things are practically impossible now
because of the regulatory power and intelligence of the Interstate
Commerce Commission.

Now it is the slowness of these operations that
distress us, and here I think that we get at the most serious
thing in the present thinking of the world - the tendency to
seek a quick way out of our troubles, irritation with the
processes of growth and a failure to appreciate the superiority
in this influence on our own development of the accepting
of the situation and building out of that by sound processes,
rather than snatching at what we want.

We can't go back and analyze what happened to us after
the War too often, I am convinced. The War made America enormously
rich. We wanted to keep all that blood money - there was nothing
else. We tried to keep prices where the war had put them.
One of my standing complaints against the New Deal is that it has been trying to stabilize the prices of 1926 which were the prices the War had made in this country. We were not willing to pay the price of peace economically. I am not sure that the most drastic, far-seeing, idealistic feature in that period back of the '20's besides the investment of the money was concerned was not what was lent in Europe and to an extent in South America to help rehabilitate a battered world. There are people now crying because the money wasn't kept here. What good was the money for our future here - we were over-developed as it was. There is no such thing in my mind as over-developing in production; production should be lavishly abundant but only if you find a way to produce it. Mr. Ford has a sound notion to my mind and I have told you I am sure, as I am always telling my stories, of my little talk with him and his illustrations by means of figures. He has got the right idea of commission of modern industry - mass production and it is a great materialistic conception. Give everybody the necessities and a certain amount of the luxuries of life - everybody. We have long had to do everything, but not to put on airs. And at the end of the War we were congested here. Now how could we find a place to take our goods? We could only do it by helping build up the consuming parts of the world. We could keep our people at work by providing what are called markets, and so the money we had taken from Europe for the ammunitions we had sold, the food we had sold, went back to help build up Germany, France and to an extent Italy, so far as Italy would accept it. We went out hunting for places where we could
help people to become consumers. Those investments, many of
them, have turned out bad, many of them probably lost, but
the idea was right. We never will balance, we will never
get the productive power of this country into balance with
consumption until the world has been built up as a greater
consumer.

The idea was right, but the mass of the people in
this country were more intent on getting rich quick than they were
in helping the world to readjust itself after the great
tragedy. We wanted to keep the prices. There never was such
popular demand for places to invest as after
the War. Unconsciously promoters gave up things in which to
invest and to get rich and there are very few of us that had
any money at all that did not take some of that. That is,
everybody yielded to that mass mania for getting rich without
work.

There is no quick end. The men are pioneers in this
world; they have, I believe myself, largely conquered the
machinery of their materialistic problem of production. To
distribute is another thing. It is going to take a long pioneering
to do that and here is where I feel there ought to come
in the largest toleration for any scheme that is trying to find
a way to distribute better to its people what it can make if
they can use it. It cannot be found by destroying anything.