

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers I*, 1885 – 1886 Oct 3, '85 to May 29, '86) The original is very badly faded.

## New Political Method

No one doubts that a great crisis has come in public affairs in Cincinnati. In order to get an understanding of the matter, we must go back to the basis of all political action; the primary election. It was in the primary elections that the first step was taken in the downward road. It is to these agencies we must look for the unparalleled demoralization that exists. At the primaries of both parties we find the same crowd of heelers, casting all the votes in the wards in the central portion of the city and a considerable share of the vote in the suburbs. If anything could add to this degradation, we find that in a number of cases at each election the same man acts as the delegate from the same ward in the conventions of both parties, sometimes without going through the formality of changing his name or even his initials to give a color of decency to the transaction.

A primary election is necessarily a proceeding in which the right of vote is founded upon membership in a party, or at least upon a more or less reserved intention to vote a party ticket in the election which follows. Unfortunately a lower measure of legality, a less defined sense of moral responsibility, has always attached to the holding of a primary election. Fraud at a primary has been held, by the average politician, to be a venial offense. The clashing interests of the candidates has given rise to methods which the boldest would hesitate to use at a general election. The sending of a crowd of heelers to the polls of the opposite party to secure the nomination of a man supposed to be the easiest to defeat, is merely looked upon as a first-class political joke. Quiet citizens shunned the primary election when they found them in the possession of a gang of roughs. A challenge to an unauthorized vote could be made only at the risk of a broken head. But in reality, a challenge ordinarily proves a useless safeguard against fraud, as the slightest expression of an intention to support a ticket, or the most vague remembrance of having voted one in the past, is sufficient to insure the reception of a vote: that is to say, it if the parties in charge of the box wish to receive it. In short we have formulated fraud and reduced corruption to a science, and furthermore to make it binding, have given it the sanction of a legal proceeding.

Had our predecessors foreseen the results of their carefully devised

legislation for the preservation of partisan elections, they would have made attendance at a primary a criminal offense, instead of surrounding it with the forms of law. It is an indisputable maxim that the stream cannot rise higher than its source. In the great cities of the country the holding of a primary election is a farce. Yet there are well-meaning persons who would urge a quiet citizen to attend a primary meaning in the 4th Ward of the city of Cincinnati as a great political duty. The practical question that presents itself is, Can the primary election be reformed, to serve a useful purpose? This is best answered by the inquiry whether any thing that has so entirely lost its sanctity of purpose can be restored to moral health. The history of all human institutions shows that such a thing is impossible. It must therefore be torn out from the roots and utterly destroyed. We must begin anew. As a means of nominating candidates, it is a formula for securing the denomination of the power of money. It is not selective, and it has ceased to be representative. It has been said by some one, that popular government is a power split up into small fragments; and that he who gathers the greatest number of these fragments, gains the right to rule. The trouble in great cities lies in the fact that the fragments lie so close together that they are easily heaped up. In the primary, the fragments are amassed before the solid body of voters have time to recover themselves. It is a game in which those who play against them use loaded dice. They find themselves committed by the act of a few men who expend the money necessary for the enterprise with all the forethought and entirely in the spirit of speculators making a commercial venture. If a great political organization can not succeed except through the machinery of a primary election, then the further continuance of a party that can lay claim to be considered a great party, is at an end. The disease, if attempted to be stamped out, could only be stamped out in places. Enough of the taint would remain to lead straightway back to the old condition of things.

One of the greatest of the misfortunes that now afflict us, may be traced to the primary election. This is the evenly balanced state of political parties. The question may be asked, Why should they not be evenly balanced when the same crowd of heeled vote at the primary elections on either side. There is at least little probability of there being much difference between the candidates chosen in such a manner. Now, two parties, evenly balanced, do not present conditions favorable to the public good. It may have been otherwise at an earlier day; but at present it is productive of evils without number. In the case of either party, as things exist today, the hope of recovery is never lost, and a defeat has little significance. The party which succeeds shows no moral force; for its leaders have nothing to rely upon.

They are timid to a degree either in enunciating principles or in carrying out measures. The sole fact remains that the agencies that have created them are beyond their control except for monetary ends; that is to say, to dispose of a certain amount of public funds in a certain way.

It is clear that any change must be radical, to be effective. A permanent committee acting as a nominating body, is one of the ways out of the swamp. To give such a formula value, party feeling must be suppressed. Acquiescence in the decision of such an organization could be given after a thorough investigation made by those who would make it their business to investigate; for it is impossible for the citizens to otherwise inform themselves in regard to those who put themselves up for office.

In the way of such acquiescence stands the specter of partisan loyalty. The denomination of party is simply a survival of the tribal elements, as it existed in a primitive state of society. Its force is seen in the fact that we allow ourselves to be herded as cattle are herded, and the crack of the party whip brings the men of brains and force of character into line as promptly as the feeble and the purposeless. Feudal allegiance still survives in the claims of party in the demand of obedience which it exacts.

Can this be broken? – This is the problem to be solved. Entire freedom from the bonds of party persevered in by a large body of citizens, is the first condition of reform

George McLaughlin

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