

WISCONSIN: AN OBJECT- LESSON FOR THE REST OF THE UNION

I doubt whether American students of social economics fully realize the extraordinary work that has been accomplished during the last decade, and is now being accomplished, in the State of Wisconsin under the lead of Senator La Follette and of the group of entirely practical and at the same time zealously enthusiastic workers who have come into active control of the State mainly or largely because of the lead he has given them. It has been both a comic and a lamentable fact that this great democratic republic, which has vaunted itself as a leader in the work of human betterment, which has boasted that it is the especial champion of the rights of the people, has usually been obliged, when it entered any field of social or economic reform, humbly to follow the lead already given in the same line by some Old World monarchy, or by one of the new commonwealths of the South Seas. We, who boast that we represent the freest people on the face of the earth, that our Nation is the home of popular rights and equal rights, and of justice as between man and man, when we try to translate our words into deeds, have to go to Australia for our ballot, and have to study what is done in England or Germany for the protection of wage-workers (and, having studied them and tried to follow the example set us, are then obliged to see some State court, still steeped in the political philosophy of the eighteenth century, solemnly declare that America, alone among civilized nations, is incompetent to right industrial wrongs). In hardly one case of recent years have we been able to initiate a great reform ourselves, and usually the reforms which have been denounced by the reactionary press as subversive of all social order have represented principles already as a matter of course in effect in various European countries.

But, for our good fortune, one of our States, the State of Wisconsin, has now developed such a body of public opinion, and such a body of leadership among its public men and its students, that hereafter we have good reason to hope that we can find within our own borders what we need.

We can now, at least in many cases, look for leadership to Wisconsin when we desire to try to solve the great social and industrial problems of the present and the future, instead of being forced always to look abroad. It is noteworthy that in Wisconsin when one speaks of such leadership it is possible to include therein the student as well as the political leader. In no other State in the Union has any university done the same work for the community that has been done in Wisconsin by the University of Wisconsin.¹

It was my good fortune recently to address the Legislature of Wisconsin, and to meet not only the members of the legislative body but the Governor, the Lieutenant-Governor, and most of the judges of the higher courts; and, characteristically enough, the hall in which I was entertained after my address was one of the buildings of the University of Wisconsin. I found the President and the teaching body of the University accepting as a matter of course the view that their duties were imperfectly performed unless they were performed with an eye to the direct benefit of the people of the State; and I found the leaders of political life, so far from adopting the cheap and foolish cynicism of attitude taken by too many politicians toward men of academic training, turning, equally as a matter of course, toward the faculty of the University for the most practical and efficient aid in helping them realize their schemes for social and civic betterment. I have often listened to well-meaning men who have spoken with a certain horror of Wisconsin, as if it were a community engaged in reckless experiment and in the effort to introduce impossible and revolutionary principles of law and governmental practice. (As a matter of fact, it has rarely been my good fortune to meet a body of public men who are more practical and at the same time more obviously earnest in their desire to achieve ideals for social and civic betterment than the public men whom I met at Madison. They were as free from the cant of the professional reformer

¹ Some time ago an admirable article appeared in the "American Magazine," by Mr. Lincoln Steffens, describing the work the University of Wisconsin was doing. Three or four years ago The Outlook published an article of appreciation of this work written by Mr. William Hard. Year by year this work grows in value and importance.

who defies words and refuses to face facts as they were free from the cant of his reactionary brother who thinks it a sign of cleverness to disbelieve in the possibility of warring against corruption. They were bound to make human rights rather than property rights the first consideration in governmental action; but they made it evident not merely by words but by deeds that they would not for one moment sanction any pandering to class hatred or any unjust assault on property rights. A big railway official, before I entered the State, had casually mentioned to me that if he had a just cause there was no tribunal in the country before which he would rather present his case than the Wisconsin Railway Commission; and not only did I find that this was the opinion of those best competent to express an opinion, but I found that it expressed the general belief of the men of property who wish nothing but justice and who are not interested in some form of special privilege. It is only in Wisconsin, so far as I know, that a really serious and thorough effort is being made to find out how to frame measures which shall give the people effective control over the big corporations without going into wild extravagance; and in this effort politician and student have joined hands. Again, I found the legislators grappling with the question of workmen's compensation. Through one of the Wisconsin University professors they were accumulating every fact of importance which had bearing on the proposed legislation, and they were engaged in businesslike fashion in trying to secure a law which should work the maximum amount of good and be open to the minimum number of objections. They were engaged in considering the introduction into the State political system of the initiative, referendum, and recall; and here what interested them was not any abstract talk about "the rights of the people" or "the wisdom of the multitude," or any appeals of the type made by the men of 1789 in France; on the contrary, what they were considering in each case were the probable practical results of the measure, what it would do for good, what it would do for evil, and how in actual practice it should be so guarded and so applied as to make it likely that it would secure the maximum

of good at the cost of the minimum of evil. This is not the place to describe the various extremely interesting fields of governmental experiment for social and civic betterment upon which Wisconsin has entered. The general public already knows that the State has done much along varying lines. What is much less widely known is the very impressive and significant fact that the public men of the State have entered upon these experiments with cool-headed caution and wisdom, with a firm purpose to go forward in the true progressive spirit, and yet with a no less firm purpose not to be misled by names, and to do nothing foolish merely because they were afraid of being called unprogressive if they did not do it. After my visit I felt like congratulating Wisconsin upon what it had done and was doing ; and I felt much more like congratulating the country as a whole because it has in the State of Wisconsin a pioneer blazing the way along which we Americans must make our civic and industrial advance during the next few decades.

THEODORE ROOSEVELT.