NEW METHODS FOR GETTING THE GOVERNMENT BACK INTO THE HANDS OF THE PEOPLE: BY THE EDITOR

It might be plausibly argued that no class is more tenaciously conservative where its own traditions are concerned than the professional politicians. Farmers do not organize to check the advance of intensive agriculture, nor physicians to warn an unsuspecting public against the seductions of bacteriology or serum therapy. The advent of wireless telegraphy was not regarded as a call to arms by the electrical engineers, nor when aeroplanes began to dot the blue were we deafened with warning cries from the physicists. And even among the theologians that disconcerting new arrival the higher criticism was not altogether anathema. But when any scientific and progressive mind turns its attention to the machinery of politics what a chorus of admonition rises from the ranks of the politicians!

Thus every effort to restore to the people the reins of government which have been so gradually but surely transferred to the hand of special privilege is noted with apprehension and misgiving by our lawmakers, who see in such reforms as the Initiative, the Referendum, the Recall, popular election of senators, and direct nominations generally, only insidious attacks upon our representative form of government. The Initiative and Referendum, they tell us, are repugnant to the republican form of government guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States. Although no less a Republican than Lincoln was content to describe our Government as "a government of the people, for the people and by the people," latter-day guardians of our liberties would have the last clause amended to read "and by representatives of the people." The Constitution, they tell us, makes this a republic and not a democracy—a representative and not a popular government. But however we describe the system the fathers fashioned, the fact remains that the central idea they sought to embody therein was an affirmation of the equal rights of men. And these new devices, inasmuch as they are aimed at special privilege, are merely fresh applications of this principle. Granting the original intention to have been that our laws should be framed not by the people but by their representatives, the fact remains that it was not intended that they should be framed by representatives of the public enemy. It was never intended that the fattening and pampering of special interests should supersede the ideal of the greatest good to the greatest number. It is certainly not imaginable that the authors of the Constitution
would contemplate with equanimity some of the uses to which the 
mechanism of government they so lovingly devised has been put. 
Yet it is these very abuses, apparently, which makes the mechanism 
so peculiarly sacrosanct in the eyes of the professional politician.

The original purpose of our political machinery was to express 
and enforce the will of the people. Gradually, but to an astounding 
extent, it has become an instrument for enforcing the will of 
special privilege in its many guises. The sole purpose of such changes 
in the old machinery as are contemplated in the Initiative and Refer-
endum is to give back to the people the control usurped by special 
privilege. But the politician, who knows every bolt and crank and 
valve in the old machine, naturally shies at the new model with its 
 baffling contraptions in the form of safety devices and automatic 
brakes.

In this connection it is interesting to note that in the last session 
of the Sixty-first Congress Senatorial opposition to the amendment 
for the popular election of Senators was largely confined to the same 
element which rallied to the defense of Senator Lorimer when his 
more squeamish colleagues tried to oust him from a seat in which 
purchased votes had helped to place him. In the same connection 
it is also pertinent to remark that with our Senators elected by the 
people instead of by the legislatures we would be spared such waste-
ful and unseemly deadlocks as the old system has recently inflicted 
upon Colorado, Montana, Iowa and New York. In the latter State, 
after more than sixty futile ballottings had resulted in nothing more 
than the wasting of the legislators’ time and the people’s money, 
a candidate, selected by Boss Murphy, was elected, and the Tam-
many tiger acquired a new lair in Washington. Even when the old 
machinery is utilized for purposes of reform instead of for purpose 
of reaction the result is not always edifying, as witness Theodore 
Roosevelt’s last attempt to lift New York State politics out of the 
mire. The echoes of that fight had scarcely died before Boss Barnes 
was again in the saddle, with the girths tightened.

Special privilege, with its agencies of corrupt politics and cor-
ruptr business, makes for the ultimate destruction of Americanism. 
In opposition to this tendency there is a growing demand for a more 
popular type of government, a government by the voters. The re-
sponse to this demand has been particularly notable in the past 
year or two, both in the Federal Government and in the States. 
Thus last year the progress of democratic principles was marked in 
Congress by the restriction of the arbitrary power of the Speaker, 
and in many of the States by the adoption of various methods of 
nominating to public office by the direct vote of the people. This
tendency is making itself felt even in New York State, where the waves set in motion by Governor Hughes' fight for direct primaries are still troubling the political waters.

Although the constitutional amendment necessary to legalize the popular election of United States Senators has not yet been authorized, Oregon has shown the way to evade this difficulty, and Nebraska and Nevada have followed her lead. The Oregon plan requires the nomination of party candidates for senator at a direct primary election. At the same primary candidates for nomination for the State legislature are given the option of placing either of the following statements after their names on the primary election ballot: (1) I promise to vote for people's choice of United States senator; or (2) I will not promise to vote for people's choice of United States Senator. At the ensuing general election the people indicate their choice in the same way that they choose a governor, and the legislature chosen at the same time will naturally be pledged to ratify the people's choice. In nineteen hundred and eight this scheme afforded an interesting illustration of the breaking down of mere party lines when a majority of the Republican legislature elected a Democratic governor whom the people had indicated as their choice.

Oregon, moreover, is the only State which has yet made any considerable use of the Initiative and Referendum, although these devices have been nominally adopted by some twelve States. The Initiative consists in the initiation of legislation by a certain fraction of the voters and its subsequent enactment by a majority of the voters to whom the proposed legislation is referred. The Referendum signifies also the popular veto upon acts of the legislature. The two measures together enable the people literally to make their own laws. "Perhaps no proposal is more attractive to the thoughtful voter impatient with the perverse legislation of misrepresentative legislatures," remarks Arthur N. Holcombe in "The American Year Book," "than this of direct legislation." It puts a weapon in the hands of the people with which they should be able to end the reign of crooked politics, special privilege and the spoils system. Another new instrument in which the public is becoming interested is the Recall. This provides for the retirement of an elected officer before the expiration of his term of office if he has forfeited the confidence of the voters. It has been adopted by a number of American cities, and in Oregon it is applicable to State officials. Most of the opposition to Arizona's proposed constitution centers around the fact that it would apply the recall even to the judiciary.

One cannot discuss the development of popular government in this country without constantly recurring to Oregon, which under
the guidance of the People's Power League has become a sort of political experiment station. There the Initiative, Referendum and Recall have been in effect for eight years. Speaking to a New York audience recently Senator Owen of Oklahoma explained that by these instruments the people can initiate any law they want and veto any they don't want. He declared that the sentiment for the Initiative and Referendum was growing rapidly, and that it wouldn't be long before every State in the Union adopted them. The Initiative, he said, is the best method of law making because it is speedy, direct, simple and efficient. He went on to say:

"The idea has swept the West as well as Maine. It was the leading issue in Massachusetts, and it will be the leading issue in New York in the next campaign—I think. Among the objections that have been made against the propositions are that under them the people will act imprudently and pass laws for their own government that are not wisely drawn; that such laws passed under popular clamor or excitement, will attack property.

"Now, the answer to this is the record of what has been done already in Oregon. Out of sixty-four propositions that have been actually submitted to the people in that State during the past eight years, not a single proposal has ever been offensive to the people, and not one ever assailed private or corporate property. It is a very economical method of law making. It cost Oregon only forty-seven thousand dollars to put through those sixty-four proposals. They were passed on with care and wisdom.

"Here is an illustration of how the people there do their own thinking. The professors of the University of Oregon were asked to indicate how they would vote on thirty-two of the propositions. Their vote was found to be identical with the vote of the people on every proposition except one. The professors voted for Woman's Suffrage, and the people voted against it.

"In the slum districts of cities, where the people are least informed, the vote on these proposals of government were much neglected, showing that the ignorant vote of the State can be depended upon to eliminate itself. This is a very important matter. It shows that the vote was the vote of the more intelligent classes."

Some of the most important and progressive laws enacted directly by the people of Oregon had previously been rejected by the legislature.

No one watching the progress of popular government can have failed to note the remarkable growth in State politics of the movement for the nomination of candidates for elective office by direct vote. Thus during the legislative sessions of nineteen hundred and
nine and nineteen hundred and ten important legislation concerning
direct nominations was enacted in a dozen States. In fact, at pres-
ent only Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Montana, West Virginia and
Vermont are holding entirely aloof from the general movement
toward direct nominations.

The conservative, with his face turned to the past, complains
that these various reforms were not contemplated by the fathers of
the nation when they framed the Constitution. But neither did the
fathers foresee the astounding changes which have come about in
the actual physical conditions of our civilization. The proposed
changes of political method would, indeed, have been practically
impossible of application under the old conditions of transportation
and communication. But now, thanks to the telegraph and a ubiqui-
tous press, any proposition can be submitted simultaneously to
all the voters not merely of a State, but of the whole nation. Because
the machinery of intercommunication has become incomparably more
efficient it becomes possible to make the machinery of government
more simple, more direct, and more responsive to the will of the
people. Why should we hesitate to do so?

But far more important than any question of precedent or in-
tention is the consideration of the results that these new devices are
likely to produce. In the case of Oregon we have an opportunity to
study the kind of laws that a people will make for itself, and this
object lesson affords no ground for pessimism. But more important
again than the fact that good laws have been written directly upon
the statute books by the hand of the voter is the growth and devel-
opment that must come to a people, individually and collectively,
through the exercise of this legislative power. A nation, like an
individual, grows through responsibility. And the more every in-
dividual is made conscious of his share in the national or communal
responsibility, the greater becomes the hope, the more noble the
possibilities, of that nation.