THE SHORT BALLOT
and
The “Invisible Government”

An Address by Elihu Root

The National Short Ballot Organization
383 Fourth Avenue, New York City
THIS address was delivered in the New York Constitutional Convention on August 30, 1915 in support of a resolution to reduce the number of elective state officers and combine the 152 state departments into 17. The measure was popularly known as the Short Ballot.

In the course of his address Mr. Root reviewed the history of the Short Ballot movement in New York, giving particular attention to the commitment of the various political parties to this reform in their platforms. The portions of the text dealing with this matter have been omitted here as being of purely local interest.

By many of Mr. Root's long associates in public life, this is regarded as one of the greatest speeches in his career.
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I HAVE had great doubt as to whether or not I should impose any remarks on this bill upon the Convention, but I have been so long deeply interested in the subject of this bill, and I shall have so few opportunities hereafter, perhaps never another, that I cannot refrain from testifying to my faith upon the principles of government which underlie the measure that is before us, and putting upon this record for whatever it may be worth the conclusions which I have reached upon the teachings of long experience in many positions, through many years of participation in the public affairs of this State and in observation of them. * * *

Now, we must vote according to our consciences. We are not bound—no legislative body is bound legally by a platform. But, Mr. Chairman, if there is faith in parties, if there is ever to be a party platform put out again, to which a man can subscribe or for which he can vote without a sense of futility, without a sense of being engaged in a confidence game; if all the declarations of principle by political parties are not to be regarded as false pretense, as humbug, as a parcel of lies, we must stand by the principles upon which we were all elected to this Convention. There is one thing, and, in so far as I know, only one thing, that the vast majority of us have assured the people who elected us we would do in this Convention, and that is that we would stand by the position of Hughes * and Wadsworth.† I, for one, am going to do it. If I form a correct judgment of the self-respecting men of this Convention, it will be with a great company that I do it.

But, Mr. Chairman, don't let us rest on that. Why was it that these conventions, one after another, four of them, declared to the people that they were for the principle of this bill? In the first place, our knowledge of human nature shows us that the thousands of experienced men in these conventions and meetings had come to the conclusion that that principle met with the opinion of the people of the State. It is all very well for Mr. Quigg to tell us what the men he met in Columbia County said, for Mr. Green ‡ to write letters to his friends ininghamton, but 970 men in that mass meeting on the 5th of December told you what their observation was, that they would commend

* Governor Hughes advocated the Short Ballot in his message to the Legislature in 1910.
† James W. Wadsworth, Jr., now Junior U. S. Senator from New York, supported the Short Ballot amendment as Speaker of the Assembly in 1910.
‡ State Commissioner of Excise.
their party to the people of this State by declaring this principle. A thousand and odd men in the Republican conventions of 1912, 1913 and 1914 have given proof conclusive of what their observation of public opinion was. A thousand and odd men in the Democratic convention of 1914 have given proof conclusive of what their observation of public opinion was. Conventions don’t put planks in platforms to drive away votes.

Again I ask, why was it that they thought that these principles would commend their tickets to the people of the State? Why was it that the people of the State had given evidence to these thousands of experienced men in the politics of the State that those principles would be popular? Well, of course, you cannot escape the conclusion that it was because the people of the State found something wrong about the government of the State. My friend, Mr. Brackett, * sees nothing wrong about it. He has been for fifteen years in the Senate; I suppose he could have stayed there as long as he wanted to. He is honored and respected and has his own way in Saratoga County. Why should he see anything wrong? My friend, Mr. Green, is comfortably settled in the Excise Department, and he sees nothing wrong. Mr. Chairman there never was a reform in administration in this world which did not have to make its way against the strong feeling of good, honest men, concerned in existing methods of administration, and who saw nothing wrong. Never! It is no impeachment to a man’s honesty, his integrity, that he thinks the methods that he is familiar with and in which he is engaged are all right. But you cannot make any improvement in this world without overriding the satisfaction that men have in the things as they are, and of which they are a contented and successful part. I say that the growth, extension, general acceptance of this principle show that all these experienced politicians and citizens in all these conventions felt that the people of the State saw something wrong in our State government, and we are here charged with a duty not of closing our eyes, but of opening them, and seeing, if we can what it was that was wrong.

Now, anybody can see that all these 152 outlying agencies, big and little, lying around loose, accountable to nobody, spending all the money they could get, violate every principle of economy, of efficiency of the proper transaction of business. Everyone can see that all around us are political organizations carrying on the business of government, that have learned their lesson from the great business organizations which have been so phenomenally successful in recent years.

The governments of our cities: Why, twenty years ago, when James Bryce wrote his “American Commonwealth,” the government of American cities was a byword and a shame for Americans all over the world. Heaven be thanked, the government of our cities has now gone far toward redeeming itself and us from that disgrace, and the government of American cities today is in the main far superior to the government of American States. I challenge contradiction to that statement. How has it been reached? How have our cities been lifted up from the low grade of incompetency and corruption on which they stood when the “American Commonwealth” was written? It has been done by applying the principles of this bill to city government.

* Leader of the opposition to the Short Ballot in the Constitutional Convention.
by giving power to the men elected by the people to do the things for which they were elected. So I say it is quite plain that that is not all. It is not all.

I am going to discuss a subject now that goes back to the beginning of the political life of the oldest man in this Convention, and one of which we cannot close our eyes, if we keep the obligations of our oath. We talk about the government of the Constitution. We have spent many days in discussing the powers of this and that and the other officer. What is the government of this State? What has it been during the forty years of my acquaintance with it? The government of the constitution? Oh, no; not half the time, or half way. When I asked what did the people find wrong in our State government, my mind goes back to those periodic fits of public rage in which the people rouse up and tear down the political leader, first of one party and then of the other party. It goes on to the public feeling of resentment against the control of party organizations, of both parties and of all parties.

Now, I treat this subject in my own mind not as a personal question to any man. I am talking about the system. From the days of Benton, and Conkling, and Arthur, and Cornell, and Platt, from the days of David B. Hill, down to the present time the government of the State has presented two different lines of activity, one of the constitutional and statutory officers of the State, and the other of the party leaders—they call them—party bosses. They call the system—I don't in the phrase, I adopt it because it carries its own meaning—the system they call "invisible government" for I don't remember how many years, Mr. Conkling was the supreme ruler in this State; the Governor did not count, the legislatures did not count; comptrollers and secretaries of state and what not, did not count. It was what Mr. Conkling said, and in a great outburst of public rage he was pulled own.

Then Mr. Platt ruled the State; for nigh upon twenty years he pulled it. It was not the Governor; it was not the Legislature; it was not any elected officers; it was Mr. Platt. And the capitol was not bare; it was at 49 Broadway; Mr. Platt and his lieutenants. It makes no difference what name you give, whether you call it Fenton or Conkling, or Cornell, or Arthur, or Platt, or by the names of men now living, the ruler of the State during the greater part of the forty years of my acquaintance with the State government has not been any man authorized by the Constitution or by the law, and, sir, there is throughout the length and breadth of this State a deep and sullen and continued resentment at being governed thus by men not of the people, accountable to none, bound by no oath of office, removable by no one. Ah! My friends here have talked about this bill's creating an autocracy. The bill points with admirable facility the very opposite reason for the bill. It is to destroy autocracy and restore power so far as may be to the men elected by the people, accountable to the people, removable by the people. I don't criticize the men of the invisible government. How can I? I have known them all, and among them have been some of my dearest friends. I can never forget the deep sense of indignation that fell in the abuse that was heaped upon Chester A. Arthur, whom I honored and loved, when he was attacked because he held the position of political leader. It is all wrong. It is all wrong that a government
not authorized by the people should be continued superior to the government that is authorized by the people.

How is it accomplished? How is it done? Mr. Chairman, it is done by the use of patronage, and the patronage that my friends on the other side of this question have been arguing and pleading for in this Convention is the power to continue that invisible government against that authorized by the people. Everywhere, sir, that these two systems of government co-exist, there is a conflict day by day, and year by year, between two principles of appointment to office, two radically opposed principles. The elected officer or the appointed officer, the lawful officer who is to be held responsible for the administration of his office, desires to get men into the different positions of his office who will do their work in a way that is creditable to him and his administration. Whether it be a president appointing a judge, or a governor appointing a superintendent of public works, whatever it may be, the officer wants to make a success, and he wants to get the man selected upon the ground of his ability to do the work.

How is it about the boss? What does the boss have to do? He has to urge the appointment of a man whose appointment will consolidate his power and preserve the organization. There has been hardly a day for the last sixteen years when I have not seen those two principles have not come in conflict. The invisible government proceeds to build up and maintain its power by a reversal of the fundamental principle of good government, which is that men should be selected to perform the duties of the office; and to substitute the idea that men should be appointed to office for the preservation and enhancement and power of the political leader. The one, the true one, looks upon appointment to office with a view to the service that can be given to the public. The other, the false one, looks upon appointment to office with a view to what can be gotten out of it. Gentlemen of the Convention, I appeal to your knowledge of facts. Every one of you know that what I say about the use of patronage under the system of invisible government is true. * * *

Mr. Chairman, we all know that the halls of this capitol swarm with men during the session of the Legislature on pay day. A great number, seldom here, rendering no service, are put on the payrolls as a matter of patronage, not of service, but of party patronage. Both parties are alike; all parties are alike. The system extends through all. Ah, Mr. Chairman, that system finds its opportunity in the division of powers, in a six-headed executive, in which, by the natural workings of human nature there shall be opposition and discord and the playing of one force against the other, and so, when we refuse to make one governor elected by the people the real chief executive, we make inevitable the setting up of a chief executive not selected by the people, not acting for the people's interest, but for the selfish interest of the few who control the party, whichever party it may be.

Think for a moment of what this patronage system means. How many of you are there who would be willing to do to your private client, or customer, or any private trust, or to a friend or neighbor what you see being done to the State of New York every year of your lives in the taking of money out of her treasury without service? We can, when we are in a private station, pass on without much attention to inveterate abuses. We can say to ourselves, I know it is wrong, I wish it could be set right; it cannot be set right, I will do nothing.
But here, here, we face the duty, we cannot escape it, we are bound to do our work, face to face, in clear recognition of the truth, unpalatable, repulsive as it may be, and the truth is that what the unerring instinct of the democracy of our State has seen in this government is not a different standard of morality is applied to the conduct of affairs of State than that which is applied in private affairs. I have been told forty times since this Convention met that you cannot change it. We can try, can't we? I deny that we cannot change it. I repel that cynical assumption which is born of the lethargy that comes from poisoned air during all these years. I assert that this perversion of democracy, this robbing democracy of its virility, can be changed as truly as the system under which Walpole governed the Commons of England, by bribery, as truly as the atmosphere which made the Credit obilier scandal possible in the Congress of the United States and has been blown away by the force of public opinion. We cannot change it a moment, but we can do our share. We can take this one step forward, not robbing the people of their part in government, but ward robbing an irresponsible autocracy of its indefensible and untrustworthy control of government, and restoring it to the people to be exercised by the men of their choice and their control.

Mr. Chairman, this Convention is a great event in the life of every man in this room. A body which sits but once in twenty years to deal with the fundamental law of the State deals not only for the present but for the future, not only by its results but by its example. Opportunity knocks at the door of every man in this assemblage, an opportunity which will never come again to most of us. While millions of men are fighting and dying for their countries across the ocean, while government is become serious, sober, almost alarming in its effect on the happiness of the lives of all that are dearest to us, it is our estimable privilege to do something here in moving our beloved State along the pathway towards better and purer government, a more invasive morality and a more effective exercise of the powers of government which preserve the liberty of the people. When you go back to your homes and review the record of the summer, you will find it cause for your children and your children's children, who will view the Convention of 1915 as we have been reviewing the work of the preceding Conventions, to say, my father, my grandfather, helped do this work for our State.

Mr. Chairman, there is a plain old house in the hills of Oneida, overlooking the valley of the Mohawk, where truth and honor dwelt in youth. When I go back, as I am about to go, to spend my declining years, I mean to go with the feeling that I can say I have not failed to speak and to act in accordance with the lessons that I learned there from the God of my fathers. God grant that this opportunity for service to our country and our State may not be neglected by any of the men for whom I feel so deep a friendship in this Convention.
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SHORT BALLOT ORGANIZATION.

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