

**SOME OF THE DIFFICULTIES IN THE
ADMINISTRATION OF A FREE
GOVERNMENT: A DISCOURSE,
PRONOUNCED BEFORE THE RHODE
ISLAND ALPHA OF THE PHI BETA KAPPA
SOCIETY, JULY 8, 1851**

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Some of the difficulties in the administration of a free government: a discourse, pronounced before the Rhode Island Alpha of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, July 8, 1851 by William Greene

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of the
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DISCOURSE.

THE problem of a wise constitution, is of much easier solution, than that of a wise administration of government. A constitution of government, is but a generalization of principles, deduced by philosophy from an experience actually realized. An administration of government, on the other hand, is an application of principles to a new experience constantly arising. The one may be said to have an ascertained certainty in the test of the past. The other must remain uncertain until determined by the test of the future. The difference is, between that which is *suggested* by events, and is a deduction *from* them, and that which *anticipates* events, and is to be judged *by* them. Hence the one is comparatively permanent—standing on great principles, which rarely change; while the other is fluctuating—perpetually subject to outward influences, which are never settled. The grand inference and lesson from all this, is, that the difficulties in government are not, or at least, not so much, in its organic structure, as in the practical carrying out of the principles prescribed by that structure, in the administration of affairs.

Whatever may be the form of a government, its administration must be reflected mainly from the character of the people who are the subjects of it. Hence it is quite as important that the public mind should be rightly informed upon great general principles, as that there should be the right sort of rulers to apply them. In popular systems, especially—such as our own, for instance—there are problems of a disturbing influence constantly arising from the very freedom upon which such systems are founded; and the free discussion of which in a popular form, is indispensable to their proper appreciation by the masses. Such discussion is particularly well for a people, who, in high success, are so engaged in the *concrete*, as to overlook, ordinarily the *abstract* of things; and who by not habitually consulting principles must be liable to all the evils of a want of them. Such discussion is farther recommended by the fact, that a sound administration of a government, can never be assured by mere events. The right and the wrong of politics strike deeper than the surface of affairs; and though great prosperity may stand up, from day to day, in commendation of a system of administrative policy, there may be hostile influences working underneath, which may upheave all that is worth having, in the foundation on which all rests.

On the present occasion, I propose to discuss some of the problems referred to, as suggested by the experience of our own political history, and as particularly applicable to our own political and social condition. The topics, to which, under this general announcement, I would invite particular attention, I shall class under

three heads: First, inequalities of individual power, which exist among a people, notwithstanding their equality of political rights: Second, the fundamental relations of sovereignty, on the one hand, and of representative responsibility on the other, which exist, reciprocally, between the people and their appointed ministers of power; and, Third, some particulars connected with the action of political parties. These topics present difficulties which would seem inherent, and therefore unavoidable, in every free system of government; and hence I shall discuss them, not for the purpose of suggesting or discovering radical correctives of them, but for the more practical purpose of modifying their tendencies by an attempt at least to understand them: for by comprehending an evil, though we may not entirely remove or overcome it, we may diminish its power for mischief, by enabling ourselves, to some extent, to be on our guard against its influences.

1. First then of inequalities of individual power; and these appear, mainly, in three forms; talent, education, and wealth. All these forms of inequality of individual power, are, in greater or less degrees, and in certain bearings, the occasions of jealousy affecting the well-being of the state. But between the first two and the last, there is this radical distinction: The jealousies awakened by superior talent and education, are mainly between individuals of similar ambition and having similar pursuits and aims. The jealousies excited by superior wealth, on the other hand, go beyond individuals and extend to classes. The effects of the

first upon the State, are comparatively remote and incidental, as they merely affect the character or career of rivals for political power or place. The effects of the last are direct and instant upon the State, as they are connected with discriminations directly predicated of the pursuits and interests of the whole people of it. The jealousies, again, between rival individuals, are comparatively temporary; for they must cease with the lives of the parties to them. Those between classes may have any length of permanency; for individual life gives no necessary measure of their duration. Of talent and education it may be further said, that they are regarded with respect rather than jealousy by the masses, as giving distinction to the national character, in which every man, however humble, feels instinctively that he is a sharer; and however deficient of either he may be himself, he claims a portion of the power and glory, associated with the possession of them by others. Besides; talent and education are intangible,—metaphysical possessions, if you please—and beyond any man's conscious power of grasping at his pleasure; and no man ever dreams of conflict for a thing which he knows to be beyond his reach. Not so of wealth; for that is a physical affair—a thing which admits of divisibility and distribution; and when large estates are accumulated in few hands, the fact that, by physical possibility, such an advantage is within every ones reach, awakens a feeling that there is something wrong in the system of things which admits of such superiority in some over others; and a fancied unfairness, suggests, at once, the correction of such inequality

as an evil. It is to the last of these forms of inequality of individual power, because of its more prominent connection with the well being of the state, that I would invite particular attention.

On this point, then, I would say, that the feeling of hostility, too often indulged by the poorer against the richer classes, as such, is at once, unphilosophical and unjust. It is unphilosophical, because it attacks a condition which is inevitable. It is unjust, because that condition being inevitable, the class attacked, exists in conformity with a state of things, ordained by a power higher than their own, and which for that reason, if there be a wrong, can involve no fault of theirs. This would seem to be one of those propositions which are so evident as to preclude all reasoning; and yet, there are those, and of a high class too, who maintain the opposite opinion, seemingly as demonstrable truth; and who insist, that inequality of wealth is a wrong, full of oppression and injustice, and calling for correction as an affair of state. Such persons, it appears to me, commit the too common error of making a particular fact the expression of a general truth. That misery is often associated with poverty, no body will deny. This is a particular fact. But that happiness or misery may depend upon conditions, altogether independent of wealth or poverty, every body must admit; and this is a general truth. Now the error referred to, arises from wrongly ascribing the miseries often attending poverty, as necessary to the condition of poverty itself, rather than to a wrong state of mind too often found in association with it. The first, pov-