

**WISCONSIN; AN
EXPERIMENT
IN DEMOCRACY**

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Wisconsin; An Experiment in Democracy by Frederic C. Howe

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FREDERIC C. HOWE

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TO
ROBERT MARION LA FOLLETTE
WHOSE WORK IN WISCONSIN
LAID THE FOUNDATIONS
FOR A DEMOCRATIC COMMONWEALTH

PREFACE

WISCONSIN is doing for America what Germany is doing for the world. It is an experiment station in politics, in social and industrial legislation, in the democratization of science and higher education. It is a state-wide laboratory in which popular government is being tested in its reaction on people, on the distribution of wealth, on social well-being.

The American state is probably our most conspicuous political failure. It has not awakened the interest of reformers as has the city. Nor has it aroused the ambitions of men as has the national government. Some writers have suggested there is no place for a quasi-sovereign commonwealth in our governmental system. They look upon it as a political vermiform appendix that has outlived the functions it was designed to perform. Decisions of the courts have impaired the dignity which the state enjoyed before the Civil War, while the resentment of business to any kind of interference has depreciated the status of the state still further.

Yet the state has wide possibilities. It controls

the machinery of nomination and election for federal, state, and municipal officials. Representatives in congress, United States senators, as well as candidates for President and Vice-President are nominated as its laws provide. Cities have only such powers as the state permits them to enjoy. Municipal charters, the power to promote health, to control tenements, to supervise the franchise corporations, issue from the state. Home rule, commission government, the form of the ballot, the initiative and referendum and recall, are all of its providing. So is the right of suffrage. The success or failure of the city is traceable to the laws which the state enacts.

If the state is corrupt, the cities will reflect its conditions. Nor can the national government rise above its source. It will mirror the machinery of nomination and election, as well as the character of the legislature, which selects the members of the United States senate.

The state is the source of civil and criminal law, of domestic and industrial relations. It is the guardian of the peace, of the health and education of the people. It controls the roads and highways. It regulates the railroads and common carriers. Industrial and labor legislation fall within its jurisdiction, as does the care of women and child workers.

Its taxing power is ample to promote a social policy. Only the federal taxes are denied to it. It can tax and through taxation destroy, as it does in the liquor business. It controls education. Our western states have developed a comprehensive programme of higher education. They are extending it to all classes by extension teaching and the application of scientific methods to agriculture. The indigent, unfortunate, and criminal classes are wards of the state, while the promotion of almost any policy for the improvement of social conditions is within its power.

Wisconsin has raised the state from the low estate into which it had fallen and converted it into a vital political agency. It is utilizing the latent powers of commonwealth building. Twenty years ago Wisconsin was not unlike other states. Its legislature was discredited and corrupt. The biennial bartering of legislation, of place and privilege, the boss and machine control were not dissimilar from conditions disclosed in other states. All this has passed away. In a few years time Wisconsin has become the most efficient commonwealth in the Union. Of the honesty of the legislative and administrative departments there is no question. Executive offices are filled with trained men who are animated by enthusiasm for the public service.

The state university, situated at the state capital, is a scientific research bureau, using its faculty and equipment in the service of the state. Professors are connected with almost every department of public administration. State problems are studied in the schools of politics, of agriculture, of mechanical engineering. Experts from the university are employed on railway, taxation, and industrial problems, and in extending the influence of the university throughout the state. Extension study has been developed into a serious rather than a recreative pursuit, while farming has been made a highly profitable vocation through the activity of the agricultural department. The university is largely responsible for the progressive legislation that has made Wisconsin so widely known as a pioneer.

Wisconsin has carried democracy farther than any state save Oregon. It has adopted simple direct primary laws, with the second choice, for all elective officials. It has provided for the direct nomination of United States senators, for a presidential primary and the control of corrupt practices, and the use of money in elections. Constitutional amendments have been approved by the legislature for the initiative and referendum and the recall. The question of woman's suffrage has been submitted to the people. The railway and public

utility laws are models which have been widely copied by other states.

Scientific thoroughness characterizes politics as in no other place in America. Legislation is preceded by exact knowledge of the abuses to be corrected and the ends to be achieved. Laws are made as simple and direct as possible. The politician has almost disappeared from the state-house. He does not thrive in this atmosphere. There is little partisan thinking, and little partisan legislation. There is an enthusiasm among officials that is a high tribute to the state. Men think in terms of Wisconsin. Permanent party ties have been greatly weakened. Voters support men and measures, rather than empty emblems. The people themselves reflect the new motives in politics.

Wisconsin has developed a comprehensive social programme for the protection of the working classes through insurance against accident, by provision for the regulation of factories and unsanitary conditions. It has adopted the German idea of continuation schools, and borrowed the labor exchange from Germany and England. The state insures its own property against fire, it offers state life insurance to its citizens. It has developed a forestry policy and is planning a comprehensive programme of state conservation through a board of public affairs.