AN ADDRESS TO THE SWINDON BRANCH OF THE WORKERS' EDUCATIONAL ASSN: GIVEN ON OCTOBER 28, 1916

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by

ROBERT BRIDGES

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AN ADDRESS

My visit to Swindon is due to Mr. Reuben George's invitation, and I must hold him responsible for any disappointment that may come of it; but I am glad to meet and talk with you, less because I can hope to say anything that you do not know than because it is a time for friends to forgather and sympathize—and there are things that I feel disposed to say—without some such inclination my words could be of no account—nothing is of value which is not heartfelt and sincere.

I am going to speak of the matter which these meetings are held to promote, that is the improvement of the educational condition of the working classes; and one is able to-day to take a different position from what would have been possible but a few years ago. For your society has won attention and respect: indeed I think that if its activities were to cease—if you were all to go to

sleep—yet legislation would proceed on favourable lines, so far is the nation now convinced of the necessity of reform in these things. And for me the war has changed the aspect of the question. I do not mean that I did not always sympathize with the cause now represented by the W.E.A. I mean this, that I never believed that in a large nation or empire a democratic government could be efficient and stable.

Put it in this way. Philosophers have from time to time drawn up ideal schemes of government based on the aim of greatest happiness, Utopias, as they are called; but the word Utopia has come to mean a state of society presumably desirable, but only feasible if men were different from what they really are. What is usually depicted is a small State working harmoniously on a democratic or social basis; and in small States the social basis can be worked, where home-life is simple, and external complications generally absent. Small village communities in a sort of patriarchal simplicity meet together to confer, the members are all personally known to one another, and they elect for their head and

representative a man whom they have known personally all their lives. These representatives are gathered into wider councils, and in this way the common interests are easily and honestly concentrated. But in larger States these essential simplicities do not exist—and the small numbers are essential; for, as the numbers increase the separate members necessarily lose their mutual personal relationship; and, as they cannot know their representative personally, they elect some plausible fellow, the man who flatters them most, or promises them the most immediate advantages. Such leaders are typically men of some oratorical power, who profess politics for the love of self-importance, or for private gain; and when such men meet in a national parliament there is neither honesty nor wisdom in their counsels.

Let me remind you that Athens—that famous example of successful democracy—was not a real democracy. It was served by a slave population: and that, you know, avoids the main difficulty of allowing the vote of the majority to rule—because the slave-workers had no vote. We have

modern examples. The United States is an example of an honest and well-considered attempt at democracy on a large scale. Its isolation from the Old World and the wide territories that were at its disposal allowed it an exceptional term of prosperity; but its present condition is not such as to convert me. And we can look nearer home: our own democracy: our Parliament in those years before the war broke out: it was a spectacle to justify all the patriotic fear that reasonable people felt. I will spare you the picture. Enough to say that the Prussian statesmen, who were observing us with jealous attention, thought that it was impossible that we could pull ourselves together; so they set off on the warpath. And they are still exhibiting to us the very superior organization of an autocracy.

But the unexpected happened. The British democracy slowly, slowly, slowly awoke to the situation. I confess that I did not expect this; much as I hoped for it. I did not think that the working-men of England would perceive that the strife was between democracy and militarism; that, if Prussia won, then the hope of democracy

was crushed for ever. Ever is hardly too big a word. The situation now is that you have gone in determined to win; and it lies with you to be faithful to the end, and to see perhaps more clearly than you yet do, that you must sacrifice all else, all present considerations, to the one purpose of a victory that shall deliver the earth from terrorism, tyranny, and slavery.

Now you who are met here to-day not only know all this, but you have also come to be convinced that an uneducated democracy can never be stable. Education is necessary for strength and stability, and some of you at least have a wholesome appetite for the requisite food. And since you cannot get your education without leisure, and cannot have leisure without some easement of the conditions of labour, and this reform involves legislation, you claim such legislation. If our democracy is to be stable, such legislation is imperative. Here I am with you all along: and it is of this education that I shall speak—not of politics nor of war.

I remember that when I first learned Greek at