

**SUGGESTIONS ON PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTIONS, WITH PARTICULAR
REFERENCE TO A LETTER OF
WILLIAM C. SOMERVILLE, ESQ**

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Suggestions on presidential elections, with particular reference to a letter of William C. Somerville, Esq by Anonymous

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ANONYMOUS

**SUGGESTIONS ON PRESIDENTIAL
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REFERENCE TO A LETTER OF
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*From Mr. Shaxton
with the respects of
Author*

SUGGESTIONS

ON

Presidential Elections,

WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE

TO

A LETTER

OF

WILLIAM C. SOMERVILLE, ESQ.

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1825.

SUGGESTIONS,

&c. &c.

THERE was published in the National Intelligencer of the 5th of February, an extract of a letter from William C. Somerville, Esq. to Mr. Garnett, a Representative from Virginia, on the general subject of Presidential Elections. After reading, as I have done more than once, the very able and candid "Address of the Westmoreland Convention," ascertained to be from the pen of the same gentleman, I was predisposed to receive in a favourable manner, any thing which might emanate from so enlightened and fair a source; and I can truly say, that this prepossession has been confirmed by perusing the article in question.

Of the importance of the subject there discussed it would be superfluous to speak. The numerous and ineffectual attempts to amend the electoral system, and the practical evils and enormous injustice which have just been seen to result from it in several states and districts, declare most emphatically that a reformation ought to be made; and the present appears to me a favourable moment for calling the attention of the republic to the subject, not only

because the recollection and conviction of the defects of the existing system are fresh and strong upon our minds, but because, from the recent happy consummation of the national election, and the consequent cessation of personal and partial views, the great intellects of the nation are in a state to examine and decide the question with a single eye to the public good, and to the future prosperity and tranquility of the country. Indeed, it appears to me impossible that any amendment should ever be made, if it is agitated only when the nation is in the heat and ferment of the Presidential contest; as well might a commander attempt to introduce a new system of tactics on the morning of a great battle.

With these impressions, and having some months ago become convinced of the propriety of addressing to my fellow citizens some reflections upon this matter, it was with great pleasure that I received the remarks of Mr. Somerville, both on account of their subject and their source.

One further preliminary observation seems to me to be proper. It cannot, I think, be denied, that propositions to amend the Constitution of the United States, originating from Congress, and still more those originating from State Legislatures, are viewed with much circumspection and jealousy by the people. This is extremely natural and salutary. It presents a strong barrier to the rage of rash innovation, and to the levity of flippant projectors. Too great a facility of introducing amendments would be worse than an absolute prohibition of any amendment whatsoever. It is therefore peculiarly proper that the changes of which we are so jealous, should be suggested, discussed, and recommended by the people themselves; and more especially a change in regard to the election of President, which, if it be a beneficial one, may go to abridge, or annul the

electoral power now residing in the popular branch of Congress. However manifest it might be made, that a change to that effect would be highly desirable, I doubt extremely whether the present House of Representatives, or any House of Representatives that we shall ever have, would have magnanimity enough to propose it, unless specially instructed and obligated at the time of their election so to do. I have never felt much of the prevailing horror at the idea of an election by the House of Representatives; on the contrary, if it must finally be made, or rather completed, by any power but the people, that is undoubtedly the body to do it. Still I think there is a preferable way, and this is almost the only point upon which I differ from Mr. Somerville, and not materially perhaps upon this.

If the following remarks produce no other effect, they may at least contribute to carry on the discussion, which that gentleman has happily begun; and, if a moderate portion of the intellectual force of the country can be concentrated, and brought to bear upon this important and difficult question, I am persuaded that we shall in a short time arrive at a safe and satisfactory result; and that the process of discussing and maturing the matter through the public press, will prepare the public mind for its reception, when it shall be presented in a formal manner, whether by a National or State Legislature.

In Mr. Somerville's estimate of the evils incident to the choice by electors chosen either by *general ticket* or by *districts*, there is no one capable of comprehending the simplest mathematical truth, who must not concur; and who must not also be dismayed at the frightful anomaly which it presents in our political system. Take the single fact that Mr. Adams had *more* of the *people's* votes in Maryland than General Jackson, and yet obtained *not half* so many *electoral* votes as his rival!

I do not entirely concur in the objections of Mr. Somerville, nor of "the Federalist," to a choice of electors by the State Legislatures under certain regulations; but this is a question into which I shall not enter, for the main feature of the plan which has some months existed in my mind, and which I intended at a convenient day to make public, is to sweep off at once the whole system of electors. Let there be no *go-betweens* in the case. The people wish to proceed directly to their object, and to know who they are voting for—not as a proxy, but as President. In fact, they do not well understand this complicated machinery of electors. I do not believe that there is one voter out of fifty in New-England, who knows or wishes to know any thing about it. The only question at the late election was, "what ticket must I put in for Adams," or "what for Crawford?" There was no inquiry about the opinions or pretensions of the electors.

In addition to these facts, and to the reasons adduced by Mr. Somerville, it ought to be remembered that the gubernatorial elections in the several states, (which, with two or three exceptions, are by a direct vote of the people,) being more frequent, and more familiar to their minds than the Presidential, incline them by the force of habit, and the authority of example, to proceed in the same way in both. This is natural, and in the true spirit of our federative institutions; which is to learn on a small scale those political lessons and practical duties, which we are to apply on a wider ground, and to greater objects; in the same manner as we learn the distances, magnitudes, and motions of the heavenly bodies from an orrery. In truth, it may well be doubted whether our local governments are more indispensable to provide for local wants, than they are as schools of political philosophy, in which to

form statesmen, legislators, and even republican citizens for the nation.

I most cordially agree therefore with Mr. Somerville, to have *no intervention of electors*. In what other mode, then, shall the people's will in regard to their chief magistrate be expressed?

On this point my own ideas have differed somewhat from those advanced by Mr. S.; but on reflection, I am induced to reject my own, and prefer his, provided a certain difficulty of which I shall hereafter speak, be removed.

A part of my project was to vote in each state for President as we do for Governors or Representatives to Congress: that is, that all the qualified voters, who vote for any state or national officer, should give in their votes for President in their respective towns and counties; that the votes should be returned to the Governors or Legislatures of the respective states; be there sorted, counted and transmitted to the President of the senate, and then be proceeded with in the same manner as the electoral votes now are.

By this plan the *two electoral votes* which each state has in virtue of its *sovereignty*, would be lost. This would be a sacrifice to which the smaller states would not probably consent; although I do not myself perceive that it would be very important; unless it be that *theoretically* it savours a little too much of consolidation. Such a proposition would be likely however to encounter a strong opposition, even though it could be clearly shown that no practical evil, nor *real* danger of consolidation would result from it, and therefore it is that I prefer this part of Mr. Somerville's plan to my own. His plan retains for the states this cherished notion of sovereignty, more cherished and more dear just in proportion as it is founded in fancy and political

superstition. Perhaps these words will be thought to require some explanation. There is not a citizen of the United States, who values more highly than I do the federative system, and the state powers upon which it is founded. It is a beautiful and celestial system. The world is now pretty well convinced that this principle of *imperia in imperio* is the greatest discovery that was ever made in political science; but I cannot be ignorant both from history and from observation, that there is a fancy or an affectation of calling these states separate and independent *sovereignties*; a mode of speech which is erroneous, and which like all error, may ultimately lead to pernicious consequences, and in fact has already lead to such consequences. How can that be called a sovereign state in the extended and true sense of the term, which has no power over foreign or even domestic commerce; which cannot levy or employ a military force except on certain specified occasions, as a sheriff of a county may? which has neither purse nor sword—which can make no treaties, form no alliances; and which according to the constitution to which she herself while yet she was sovereign, consented, can be lawfully invaded, treated as a rebel, subdued and reduced to that subordinate place in the system which she proposed and agreed to fill; and which the public safety and general good require that she should fill. The truth is that the states have still very large, beneficial and invaluable powers, powers essential to the *existence* of the republic; and if they ever have been, or ever shall be in danger; it has not been and will not be from those who wish to confine them within their true constitutional limits; but from those who would exaggerate and stretch them to suit the party prejudices and passions of a day. Ambitious men, and disappointed parties when out of power in the na-