
Legislation

by Eugene V. Debs

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It will be conceded, we assume that legislation is the means by which governments exist and are perpetuated: legislation, signifying law making, a legislator is a lawmaker, one clothed with legal authority to make laws — hence, absolute rulers are legislators, their decrees are laws. Absolutism in government has not been popular hitherto in the United States. We boast of a government by the people, we talk of the sovereignty of the citizen, and yet, whether a law is made by an autocrat, a congress, or a legislature matters little, it has precisely the same end in view and reaches it; by the autocrat, with terrible directness, by a limited monarchy and a democracy, by a more circuitous route, but in at least three objective points, results are the same. All the autocrat can do, or the extreme of his power, is to take (1) life, (2) liberty, and (3) property, and the mildest government on the face of the earth, regardless of name, can do and does the same things. We are not discussing processes, but results. In the instances cited, autocracy and democracy do precisely the same things. The case admits of neither sophism, technicality, nor special pleading; the facts are as stated, and in both cases the claim set up, is the supremacy of law.

In the United States, the people discuss legislation. Here we have a free press and free speech; here, the people, excepting always officeholders, parasites, lickspittles and all the fawning crew of bootlickers, are not afraid of officials, from a coroner who sits on a corpse to a President; the people have a fad that these officials are simply servants, not masters, and yet these servants(?) in Congress and legislatures enact laws as infamous as ever disgraced an autocracy. The machinery constructed by the government by the people, crushes and grinds and kills and robs, just the same as a government by a tsar, sultan, or shah, as we have remarked, with a little more circumlocution, but ultimately reaching the same result.

Let it be understood, that we are not defending autocracy, nor aristocracy, nor any other -ocracy, except democracy, the supreme will of the people, but it is, nevertheless, true that when legislation crushes an individual, it does not matter to him or her whether he or she is the victim of the decree of an autocrat or of a law enacted by a body chosen by the people. If the life of a man is taken, what matters it to the victim who ordered his death? After the halter, the axe, or the bullet has done their work, subsequent proceedings no longer interest the victim, but between sentence and execution the condemned may if he regards his sentence unjust engage in very serious reflections however unprofitable they may be. If the subject of an autocrat, having no voice in the government, he will not accuse himself of having had any agency whatever in bringing about his doom, and the same would be true if the despot had deprived him of his liberty or his property, having had no voice in shaping the laws under which he suffers, he could not reproach himself for any dereliction of duty, he simply had to submit in silence to death, slavery, and poverty as his master might choose. But in a government like ours, if by the operation of law calamities overtook and overwhelmed him, he could not submit without realizing that in some measure he had been the author of the misfortunes of which he complained. He had lived in a land where the people were the sovereigns, in a land where ballots determined everything, and if he voted for vicious men and continued to vote for them, he would be regarded in a measure, and a very large measure, the author of the calamities he bewailed and would be entitled to precious little sympathy.

To this it has come. Legislation is largely accountable for the national ills which are now of such a formidable character as to excite universal alarm, and the people who have been choosing vicious representatives are primarily responsible for every vicious law upon the statute books; blinded by partisan fealty, the people have for years pursued a course which has at last produced a crop of bitter fruits, and the end is not yet to be seen. Men see the frowning cloud and the vivid flash of the lightning, and they hear the deep toned mutterings of the thunder, and when any suggestion is made by workingmen that a different class of representatives are required to enact wise and just laws, and to repeal vicious and odious statutes, a subsidized press, and bribe cursed and debauched men cry out, "politics, politics," as if there was some other way out of the darkness into the light, some other way from peril to safety other than politics, something superior

to the ballot wielded by honest, conscientious men. But there is no other method of relief that comports with our system of government. If our liberties are to be maintained, if our institutions are to be perpetuated, it must be done by a free, untrammelled ballot, and men must be in politics if they vote at all, and when men can be persuaded to vote for honest men pledged to honest measures, plutocrats will cease to rob, will cease to have at their beck and call the armies of the states and of the nation to aid them in their piracies upon labor, and they will have a judiciary which, under ermined robes will cease to hide an untold amount of infamy.

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