

Radical Reflections

Ross Winn

January 19, 1902

I shall not vote in the coming election. I am fully aware that this will be of little consequence so far as concerns the general result of the impending contest; and that, perhaps, is my chief reason for not voting. But I have other reasons, chief among them is that I do not believe in government by the majority, nor by the minority either.

I do not believe in government at all.

I am an Anarchist.

But, even if I were not an Anarchist, I would not vote. In the first place, our ballot system of government is a dismal failure—even if we concede it to be right in theory. There is no honesty in it, no sense manifested in the results; and no good has ever, so far as I know, come out of it. Most of those who seek office are actuated by purely self-considerations. They want the offices for the emoluments attached thereto. Men who seek an office simply to advance their own interests will not sacrifice their interests for the public weal. They will not even go very far out of their way to serve the interests of their constituents, simply because there is nothing in it for themselves.

Most of those who become candidates are, in the beginning, fairly honest, so far as regards their motives and intentions. But the moment a man enters politics as a candidate, he discovers that fraud, cunning, hypocrisy, and trickery are methods freely used by his opponents; and to successfully cope with them he must adopt their tactics. He thinks he is justified by expediency in so doing; besides he perhaps honestly believes he can use these weapons in an honest cause without any tarnish to his motive and his integrity. But he is mistaken. Fraud and falsehood cannot serve a righteous cause. You may vanquish the devil with his own fire, but you will be pretty sure to come off from the contest with some of the devil's own odor of brimstone about you. The man who resorts to trickery to carry his point, even against wrong, is already a trickster, and is no better, so far as the morality of his conduct is concerned, than he who uses trickery with less honorable motives.

But, unfortunately for the candidate who seeks office with honest intentions, and who refuses to sully himself with the practice of deception and fraud, the political forces are all against him. By refusing to be all things to all men, and failing to pander to the ignorance and errors of the social herd, he fails to secure popular favor; and the voters go to the unscrupulous demagog, who wins approval by pandering to popular prejudice. Hence, the honest politician ever plays the role of an unsuccessful candidate.

Political corruption and dishonesty is so notoriously apparent that even believers in government, advocates of political action, are fully conscious of it. Yet they go on voting, with the vague hope that, in some mysterious way, conditions will be changed, and that, after a while, enough pure men will be elected to office to ensure an honest administration of public affairs. Their hopes are never realized, the new men are put in and new parties given control. The trouble is with the system and not with those who administer it. The very nature and principle of government, of human authority, is demoralizing and corrupting. No man can possess the power to rule over others without using that power to his own advancement; and the spirit of selfishness would certainly be non-existent in the man who did not do so. Therefore, as long as human nature is what it is, we cannot expect men in power to disregard their individual interests, nor will they fail to make use of their power to exploit their fellows for their own personal gain.

The man who votes gives a certain degree of approval to the result of the election, even tho he be on the defeated side. And that is precisely why I, as an Anarchist, have no business at the polls. I do not wish to be governed; I do not wish to govern others, consequently I shall act consistently with my professed principles by declining to vote.

Of course, those who take this view will contend that, in declining to vote, I become in a measure responsible for the election of bad men, who, by my vote and influence, might be defeated instead. But I do not think so. In the first place, a thoroly honest man has no business to be a candidate for office, and nothing worse could happen to him than to be elected. When a man becomes a candidate, he is confronted by one problem: How to secure the largest number of votes. This overshadows all else. To secure the votes of the majority he must of necessity pander to the whims and prejudices of the majority. If he happens to entertain an opinion, of which he knows the majority disapproves, he must be silent—and there he surrenders his independence. He is then no longer honest. That is the first step.

Suppose we admit it to be possible for an honest man to be elected. We know, in the first place, that in the administration of any public office, there is continually arising a conflict of interests; and new cases constantly appear, wherein the official must go against the wishes of one person or class of persons, in order to satisfy another person or class. In such a case, the official knows very well that, take whatever side he may, he is pretty sure to array the defeated side against him. Here he is again exposed to temptation—he must choose often between his convictions of right, and the certainty of political retirement by offending some powerful political element. Can a man so situated remain honestly true to himself and his convictions? Hardly.

But, supposing the possibility of a conscientious official, another question arises. Can a public official be really a servant of the people who elect him? Does the elevation to official power carry with it an endowment of superior wisdom? Are we sure in electing our servant, that he will know just what is and is not good for us, even tho he be willing to act in the interest of his masters? If we place our social welfare in the hands of a government, we are compelled to rely upon the wisdom as well as the honesty of those who constitute the government, to do the right thing with the power granted them. But the welfare of society is chiefly a matter of individual opinion. Society is merely an aggregation of separate individualities, in which, aside from those common interests upon which all agree, the vast majority of issues and problems that are constantly arising, are largely matters of individual concern, upon which there is at all times diverging opinions, as conflictingly various as the individuals themselves. In this state of affairs, how is it possible for a man, invested with administrative power, to so conduct public business as to give either justice or satisfaction to all concerned?

It simply cannot be, and that is precisely why I am an Anarchist. I do not believe that any scheme of government can be devised under the operation of which the interest of all would be subserved. This is because each individual must live his own life, and pursue his happiness in his own way. To the extent that men and women are left free to pursue their ideals and to follow their natural bent are they satisfied and friction is avoided. The strife and dissension in society, in every instance, is the outcropping of the spirit of authority. I want for every man, woman, and child the right to govern themselves, to direct their own affairs, to live their own lives. Therefore I have no use for the government official, and will not aid in his election.

I am an Anarchist, therefore I will not vote.

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