

1888

THE ARGUMENT FOR A PARTY REFORM

by James Russell Lowell

IF the dangers and temptations of parties be such as I have indicated, and I do not think that I have overstated them, it is for the interest of the best men in both parties that there should be a neutral body, not large enough to form a party by itself, nay, which would lose its power for good if it attempted to form such a party, and yet large enough to moderate between both, and to make both more cautious in their choice of candidates and in their connivance with evil practices. If the politicians must look after the parties, there should be somebody to look after the politicians; somebody to ask disagreeable questions and to utter uncomfortable truths; somebody to make sure, if possible, before election, not only what, but whom the candidate, if elected, is going to represent. What to me is the saddest feature of our present methods is the pitfalls which they dig in the path of ambitious and able men who feel that they are fitted for a political career, that by character and training they could be of service to their country, yet who find every avenue closed to them unless at the sacrifice of the very independence which gives them a claim to what they seek. As in semi-barbarous times the sincerity of a converted Jew was tested by forcing him to swallow pork, so these are required to gulp without a wry face what is as nauseous to them. I would do all in my power to render such loathsome compliances unnecessary. The pity of it is that with our political methods the hand is of necessity subdued to what it works in. It has been proved, I think, that the old parties are not to be reformed from within. It is from without that the attempt must be made, and it is the Independents who must make it.

It is through its politics, through its capacity for government, the noblest of sciences, that a nation proves its right to a place among the other beneficent forces of nature. For politics permeate more widely than any other force, and reach every one of us, soon or late, to teach or to debauch. We are confronted with new problems and new conditions. We and the population which is to solve them are very unlike that of fifty years ago. As I was walking not long ago in the Boston Public Garden, I saw two Irishmen looking at Ball's equestrian statue of Washington, and wondering who was the personage thus commemorated. I had been brought up among the still living traditions of Lexington, Concord, Bunker Hill, and the siege of Boston. To these men Ireland was still their country, and America a place to get their daily bread. This put me upon thinking. What, then, is patriotism, and what its true value to a man? Was it merely an unreasoning and almost cat-like attachment to certain square miles of the earth's surface, made up in almost equal parts of life-long association, hereditary tradition, and parochial prejudice? This is the narrowest and most provincial form, as it is also, perhaps, the strongest, of that passion or virtue, whichever we choose to call it. But did it not fulfil the essential condition of giving men an ideal outside

themselves, which would awaken in them capacities for devotion and heroism that are deaf even to the penetrating cry of self? All the moral good of which patriotism is the fruitful mother, my two Irishmen had in abundant measure, and it had wrought in them marvels of fidelity and self-sacrifice which made me blush for the easier terms on which my own duties of the like kind were habitually fulfilled. Were they not daily pinching themselves that they might pay their tribute to the old hearthstone or the old cause three thousand miles away? If tears tingle our eyes when we read of the like loyalty in the clansmen of the attained and exiled Lochiel, shall this leave us unmoved?

I laid the lesson to heart. I would, in my own way, be as faithful as they to what I believed to be the best interests of my country. Our politicians are so busy studying the local eddies of prejudice or interest that they allow the main channel of our national energies to be obstructed by dams for the grinding of private grist. Our leaders no longer lead, but are as skilful as Indians in following the faintest trail of public opinion. I find it generally admitted that our moral standard in politics has been lowered, and is every day going lower. Some attribute this to our want of a leisure class. It is to a book of the Apocrypha that we are indebted for the invention of the Man of Leisure. But a leisure class without a definite object in life, and without generous aims, is a bane rather than a blessing. It would end in the weariness and cynical pessimism in which its great exemplar Ecclesiastes ended, without leaving us the gift which his genius left. What we want is an active class who will insist in season and out of season that we shall have a country whose greatness is measured, not only by its square miles, its number of yards woven, of hogs packed, of bushels of wheat raised, not only by its skill to feed and clothe the body, but also by its power to feed and clothe the soul; a country which shall be as great morally as it is materially; a country whose very name shall not only, as now it does, stir us as with the sound of a trumpet, but shall call out all that is best within us by offering us the radiant image of something better and nobler and more enduring than of something that shall fulfil our own thwarted aspiration, when we are but a handful of forgotten dust in the soil trodden by a race whom we shall have helped to make more worthy of their inheritance than we ourselves had the power, I might almost say the means, to be.

THE END