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IN this paper I endeavor to lay down the fundamental principles which should govern the Negro franchise in a democracy, and to outline a practical programme for the immediate treatment of the problem.

As I see it, the question of Negro suffrage in the United States presents two distinct aspects: —

First: the legal aspect.

Second: the practical aspect.

It will be admitted, I think, without argument, that all governments do and of a necessity must exercise the right to limit the number of people who are permitted to take part in the weighty responsibilities of the suffrage. Some governments allow only a few men to vote; in an absolute monarchy there is only one voter; other governments, as they become more democratic, permit a larger proportion of the people to vote.

Our own government is one of the freest in the world in the matter of suffrage; and yet we bar out, in most states, all women; we bar out Mongolians, no matter how intelligent; we bar out Indians, and all foreigners who have not passed through a certain probationary stage and have not acquired a certain small amount of education. We also declare — for an arbitrary limit must be placed somewhere — that no person under twenty−one years of age may exercise the right to vote, although some boys of eighteen are to− day better equipped to pass intelligently upon public questions than many grown men. We even place adult white men on probation until they have resided for a certain length of time, often as much as two years, in the state or the town where they wish to cast their ballots. Our registration and ballot laws eliminate hundreds of thousands of voters; and finally, we bar out everywhere the defective and criminal classes of our population. We do not realize, sometimes, I think, how limited the franchise really is, even in America. We forget that out of nearly ninety million people in the United States, fewer than fifteen million cast their votes for President in 1908 — or about one in every six.

Thus the practice of a restricted suffrage is very deeply implanted in our system of government. It is everywhere recognized that even in a democracy lines must be drawn, and that the ballot, the precious instrument of government, must be hedged about with stringent regulations. The question is, where shall these lines be drawn in order that the best interests, not of any particular class, but of the whole nation, shall be served.

Upon this question, we, as free citizens, have the absolute right to agree or disagree with the present laws regulating suffrage; and if we want more people brought in as partakers in government, or some people who are already in, barred out, we have a right to organize, to agitate, to do our best to change the laws. Powerful organizations of women are now agitating for the right to vote; there is an organization which demands the suffrage for Chinese and Japanese who wish to become citizens. It is even conceivable that a society might be founded to lower the suffrage age−limit from twenty−one to nineteen years, thereby endowing a large number of young men with the privileges, and therefore the educational responsibilities, of political power. On the other hand, a large number of people, chiefly in our Southern States, earnestly believe that the right of the Negro to vote should be curtailed, or even abolished.

Thus we disagree, and government is the resultant of all these diverse views and forces. No one can say dogmatically how far democracy should go in distributing the enormously important powers of active government. Democracy is not a dogma; it is not even a dogma of free suffrage. Democracy is a life, a spirit, a growth. The primal necessity of any sort of government, democracy or otherwise, whether it be more unjust or less unjust toward special groups of its citizens, is to exist, to be a going concern, to maintain upon the whole a stable and peaceful administration of affairs. If a democracy cannot provide such stability, then the people go back to some form of oligarchy. Having secured a fair measure of stability, a democracy proceeds with caution toward the extension of the suffrage to more and more people — trying foreigners, trying women, trying Negroes.

And no one can prophesy how far a democracy will ultimately go in the matter of suffrage. We know only the tendency. We know that in the beginning, even in America, the right to vote was a very limited matter. In the

early years, in New England, only church−members voted; then the franchise was extended to include property−owners; then it was enlarged to include all white adults; then to include Negroes; then, in several Western States, to include women.

Thus the line has been constantly advancing, but with many fluctuations, eddies, and back−currents — like any other stream of progress. At the present time the fundamental principles which underlie popular government, and especially the whole matter of popular suffrage, are much in the public mind. The tendency of government throughout the entire civilized world is strongly in the direction of placing more and more power in the hands of the people. In our own country we are enacting a remarkable group of laws providing for direct primaries in the nomination of public officials, for direct election of United States Senators, and for direct legislation by means of the initiative and referendum; and we are even going to the point, in many cities, of permitting the people to recall an elected official who is unsatisfactory. The principle of local option, which is nothing but that of direct government by the people, is being everywhere accepted. All these changes affect, fundamentally, the historic structure of our government, making it less republican and more democratic.

Still more important and far−reaching in its significance is the tendency of our government, especially our Federal Government, to regulate or to appropriate great groups of business enterprises formerly left wholly in private hands. More and more, private business is becoming public business.

Now, then, as the weight of responsibility upon the popular vote is increased, it becomes more and more important that the ballot should be jealously guarded and honestly exercised. In the last few years, therefore, a series of extraordinary new precautions have been adopted: the Australian ballot, more stringent registration systems, the stricter enforcement of naturalization laws to prevent the voting of crowds of unprepared foreigners, and the imposition by several states, rightly or wrongly, of educational and property tests. It becomes a more and more serious matter every year to be an American citizen, more of an honor, more of a duty.

At the close of the Civil War, in a time of intense idealistic emotion, some three−quarters of a million of Negroes, the mass of them densely ignorant and just out of slavery, with the iron of slavery still in their souls, were suddenly given the political rights of free citizens. A great many people, and not in the South alone, thought then, and still think, that it was a mistake to bestow the high powers and privileges of a wholly unrestricted ballot — a ballot which is the symbol of intelligent self− government — upon the Negro. Other people, of whom I am one, believe that it was a necessary concomitant of the revolution; it was itself a revolution, not a growth, and like every other revolution it has had its fearful reaction. Revolutions, indeed, change names, but they do not at once change human relationships. Mankind is reconstructed not by proclamations, or legislation, or military occupation, but by time, growth, education, religion, thought. At that time, then, the nation drove down the stakes of its idealism in government far beyond the point it was able to reach in the humdrum activities of everyday existence. A reaction was inevitable; it was inevitable and perfectly natural that there should be a widespread questioning as to whether all Negroes, or indeed any Negroes, should properly be admitted to full political fellowship. That questioning continues to this day.

Now, the essential principle established by the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution was not that all Negroes should necessarily be given an unrestricted access to the ballot; but that the right to vote should not be denied or abridged 'on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.' This amendment wiped out the color−line in politics so far as any written law could possibly do it.

Let me here express my profound conviction that the principle of political equality then laid down is a sound, valid, and absolutely essential principle in any free government; that restrictions upon the ballot, when necessary, should be made to apply equally to white and colored citizens; and that the Fifteenth Amendment ought not to be, and cannot be repealed. Moreover, I am convinced that the principle of political equality is more firmly established to−day in this country than it was forty years ago, when it had only Northern bayonets behind it. For now, however short the practice falls of reaching the legal standard, the principle is woven into the warp and woof of Southern life and Southern legislation. Many Southern white leaders of thought are to−day convinced, not forced believers in the principle; and that is a great omen.

Limitations have come about, it is true, and were to be expected as the back−currents of the revolution. Laws providing for educational and property qualifications as a prerequisite to the exercise of the suffrage have been passed in all the Southern States, and have operated to exclude from the ballot large numbers of both white and colored citizens, who on account of ignorance or poverty are unable to meet the tests. These provisions, whatever

the opinion entertained as to the wisdom of such laws, are well within the principle laid down by the Fifteenth Amendment. But several Southern States have gone a step further, and by means of the so−called 'grandfather laws,' have exempted certain ignorant white men from the necessity of meeting the educational and property tests. These unfair 'grandfather laws,' however, in some of the states adopting them, have now expired by limitation.

Let me then lay down this general proposition: —

Nowhere in the South to−day is the Negro cut off legally, as a Negro, from the ballot. Legally, to−day, any Negro who can meet the comparatively slight requirements as to education, or property, or both, can cast his ballot on a basis of equality with the white man. I have emphasized the word legally, for I know the practical difficulties which confront the Negro votes in many parts of the South. The point I wish to make is that legally the Negro is essentially the political equal of the white man; but that practically, in the enforcement of the law, the legislative ideal is still pegged out far beyond the actual performance.

Now, then, if we are interested in the problem of democracy, we have two courses open to us. We may think the laws are unjust to the Negro, and incidentally to the 'poor white' man as well. If we do, we have a perfect right to agitate for changes; and we can do much to disclose, without heat, the actual facts regarding the complicated and vexatious legislative situation in the South, as regards the suffrage. Every change in the legislation upon this subject should, indeed, be jealously watched, that the principle of political equality between the races be not legally curtailed. The doctrine laid down in the Fifteenth Amendment must, at any hazard, be maintained.

But, personally, — and I am here voicing a profound conviction, — I think our emphasis at present should be laid upon the practical rather than upon the legal aspect of the problem; I think we should take advantage of the widely prevalent feeling in the South that the question of suffrage has been settled, legally, for some time to come: of the desire on the part of many Southern people, both white and colored, to turn aside from the discussion of the political status of the Negro.

In short, let us for the time being accept the laws as they are, and build upward from that point. Let us turn our attention to the practical task of finding out why it is that the laws we already have are not enforced, and how best to secure an honest vote for every Negro and equally for every 'poor white' man, who is able to meet the requirements, but who for one reason or another does not or cannot now exercise his rights. I include the disfranchised white man as well as the Negro, because I take it that we are interested, first of all, in democracy, and unless we can arouse the spirit of democracy, South and North, we can hope for justice neither for Negroes, nor for the poorer class of white men, nor for the women of the factories and shops, nor for the children of the cottonmills.

Taking up this side of the problem we shall discover two entirely distinct difficulties: —

First, we shall find many Negroes, and indeed hundreds of thousands of white men as well, who might vote, but who, through ignorance, or inability or unwillingness to pay the poll−taxes, or from mere lack of interest, disfranchise themselves.

The second difficulty is peculiar to the Negro. It consists in open or concealed intimidation on the part of the white men who control the election machinery. In many places in the South to−day no Negro, how well qualified, would dare to present himself for registration; when he does, he is rejected for some trivial or illegal reason.

Thus we have to meet a vast amount of apathy and ignorance and poverty on the one hand, and the threat of intimidation on the other.

First of all, for it is the chief injustice as between white and colored men with which we have to deal, — an injustice which the law already makes illegal and punishable, — how shall we meet the matter of intimidation? As I have already said, the door of the suffrage is everywhere legally open to the Negro, but a certain sort of Southerner bars the passage−way. He stands there and, law or no law, keeps out many Negroes who might vote; and he represents in most parts of the South the prevailing public opinion.

Shall we meet this situation by force? What force is available? Shall the North go down and fight the South? You and I know that the North to−day has no feeling but friendship for the South. More than that — and I say it with all seriousness, because it represents what I have heard wherever I have gone in the North to make inquiries regarding the Negro problem — the North, wrongly or rightly, is to−day more than half convinced that the South is right in imposing some measure of limitation upon the franchise. There is now, in short, no disposition anywhere in the North to interfere in internal affairs in the South — not even with the force of public opinion.

What other force, then, is to be invoked? Shall the Negro revolt? Shall he migrate? Shall he prosecute his case

in the courts? The very asking of these questions suggests the inevitable reply.

We might as well, here and now, dismiss the idea of force, express or implied. There are times of last resort which call for force; but this is not such a time.

What other alternatives are there?

Accepting the laws as they are, then, there are two methods of procedure, neither sensational nor exciting. I have no quick cure to suggest, but only old and tried methods of commonplace growth.

The underlying causes of the trouble in the country being plainly ignorance and prejudice, we must meet ignorance and prejudice with their antidotes, education and association.

Every effort should be made to extend free education among both Negroes and white people. A great extension of education is now going forward in the South. The Negro is not by any means getting his full share; but, as certainly as sunshine makes things grow, education in the South will produce tolerance. That there is already such a growing tolerance no one who has talked with the leading white men in the South can doubt. The old fire−eating, Negro−baiting leaders of the Tillman−Vardaman type are swiftly passing away: a far better and broader group is coming into power.

In his last book, Mr. Edgar Gardner Murphy, of Alabama, expresses this new point of view when he says, —

'There is no question here as to the unrestricted admission [to the ballot] of the great masses of our ignorant and semi− ignorant blacks. I know no advocate of such admission. But the question is as to whether the individuals of the race, upon conditions or restrictions legally imposed and fairly administered, shall be admitted to adequate and increasing representation in the electorate. And as that question is more seriously and more generally considered, many of the leading publicists of the South, I am glad to say, are quietly resolved that the answer shall be in the affirmative.'

From an able Southern white man, a resident of New Orleans, I received recently a letter containing these words: —

'I believe we have reached the bottom, and a sort of quiescent period. I think it most likely that from now on there will be a gradual increase of the Negro vote. And I honestly believe that the less said about it, the surer the increase will be.'

Education — and by education I mean education of all sorts, industrial, professional, classical, in accordance with each man's talents — will not only produce breadth and tolerance, but will help to cure the apathy which now keeps so many thousands of both white men and Negroes from the polls: for it will show them that it is necessary for every man to exercise all the political rights within his reach. If he fails voluntarily to take advantage of the rights he already has, how shall he acquire more rights?

And as ignorance must be met by education, so prejudice must be met with its antidote, which is association. Democracy does not consist in mere voting, but in association, the spirit of common effort, of which the ballot is a mere visible expression. When we come to know one another we soon find that the points of likeness are much more numerous than the points of difference. And this human association for the common good, which is democracy, is difficult to bring about anywhere, whether among different classes of white people, or between white people and Negroes. As one of the leaders of the Negro race, Dr. Du Bois, has said, —

'Herein lies the tragedy of the age. Not that men are poor: all men know something of poverty. Not that men are wicked: who is good? Not that men are ignorant: what is truth? Nay, but that men know so little of each other.'

After the Atlanta riot I attended a number of conferences between leading white men and leading colored men. It is true those meetings bore evidence of awkwardness and embarrassment, for they were among the first of the sort to take place in the South, but they were none the less valuable. A white man told me after one of the meetings, —

'I did not know that there were any such sensible Negroes in the South.'

And a Negro told me that it was the first time in his life that he had ever heard a Southern white man reason in a friendly way with a Negro concerning their common difficulties.

More and more these associations of white and colored men, at certain points of contact, must and will come about. Already, in connection with various educational and business projects in the South, white and colored men meet on common grounds, and the way has been opened to a wider mutual understanding. And it is common enough now, where it was unheard of a few years ago, for both white men and Negroes to speak from the same platform in the South. I have attended a number of such meetings. Thus slowly — awkwardly, at first, for two

centuries of prejudice are not immediately overcome — the white man and Negro will come to know one another, not merely as master and servant, but as co−workers. These things cannot be forced.

One reason why the white man and the Negro have not got together more rapidly in the South than they have, is because they have tried always to meet at the sorest points. When sensible people, who must live together whether or no, find that there are points at which they cannot agree, it is the part of wisdom to avoid these points, and to meet upon other and common interests. Upon no other terms, indeed, can a democracy exist, for in no imaginable future state will individuals cease to disagree with one another upon something less than half of all the problems of life.

'Here we all live together in a great country,' say the apostles of this view; 'let us all get together and develop it. Let the Negro do his best to educate himself, to own his own land, and to buy and sell with the white people in the fairest possible way.'

It is wonderful, indeed, how close together men who are stooping to a common task soon come.

Now, buying and selling, land ownership and common material pursuits, may not be the highest points of contact between man and man, but they are real points, and help to give men an idea of the worth of their fellows, white or black. How many times, in the South, I heard white men speak in high admiration of some Negro farmer who had been successful, or of some Negro blacksmith who was a worthy citizen, or of some Negro doctor who was a leader of his race.

It is curious, once a man (any man, white or black) learns to do his job well, how he finds himself in a democratic relationship with other men. I remember asking a prominent white citizen of a town in Central Georgia if he knew anything about Tuskegee. He said, —

'Yes: I had rather a curious experience last fall. I was building a hotel and couldn't get any one to do the plastering as I wanted it done. One day I saw two Negro plasterers at work in a new house that a friend of mine was building. I watched them for an hour. They seemed to know their trade. I invited them to come over and see me. They came, took the contract for my work, hired a white man to carry mortar at a dollar a day, and when they got through it was the best job of plastering in town. I found that they had learned their trade at Tuskegee. They averaged four dollars a day each in wages. We tried to get them to locate in our town, but they went back to school.'

When I was in Mississippi a prominent banker showed me his business letter−heads.

'Good job, isn't it?' he said. 'A Negro printer did it. He wrote to me asking if he might bid on my work. I replied that although I had known him a long time I couldn't give him the job merely because he was a Negro. He told me to forget his color, and said that if he couldn't do as good a job and do it as reasonably as any white man could, he didn't want it. I let him try, and now he does most of our printing.'

Out of such points of contact, then, encouraged by such wise leaders as Booker T. Washington, will grow an ever finer and finer spirit of association and of common and friendly knowledge. And that will inevitably lead to an extension upon the soundest possible basis of the Negro franchise. I know cases where white men have urged intelligent Negroes to come and cast their ballots, and have stood sponsor for them, out of genuine respect. As a result, to−day, the Negroes who vote in the South are, as a class, men of substance and intelligence, fully equal to the tasks of citizenship.

Thus, I have boundless confidence not only in the sense of the white men of the South, but in the innate capability of the Negro, and that once these two come really to know each other, not at sore points of contact, but as common workers for a common country, the question of suffrage will gradually solve itself along the lines of true democracy.

Another influence also will tend to change the status of the Negro as a voter. That is the pending break−up of the political solidarity of the South. All the signs point to a political realignment upon new issues in this country, both South and North. Old party names may even pass away. And that break−up, with the attendant struggle for votes, is certain to bring into politics thousands of Negroes and white men now disfranchised. The result of a real division on live issues has been shown in many local contests in the South, as in the fight against the saloons, when every qualified Negro voter, and every Negro who could qualify, was eagerly pushed forward by one side or the other. With such a division on new issues the Negro will tend to exercise more and more political power, dividing, not on the color line, but on the principles at stake.

Thus in spite of the difficulties which now confront the Negro, I cannot but look upon the situation in a spirit

of optimism. I think sometimes we are tempted to set a higher value upon the ritual of a belief than upon the spirit which underlies it. The ballot is not democracy: it is merely the symbol or ritual of democracy, and it may be full of passionate social, yes, even religious significance, or it may be a mere empty and dangerous formalism. What we should look to, then, primarily, is not the shadow, but the substance of democracy in this country. Nor must we look for results too swiftly; our progress toward democracy is slow of growth and needs to be cultivated with patience and watered with faith.