James Wilson Speech: Pennsylvania Convention 24 November 1787 (excerpts)[1]

As the only member of this respectable body, who had the honor of a seat in the late Federal Convention, it is peculiarly my duty, Mr. President, to submit to your consideration, the general principles that have produced the national Constitution, which has been framed and proposed by the assembled delegates of the United States, and which must finally stand or fall by the concurrent decision of this Convention, and of others acting upon the same subject, under similar powers and authority. . . .

I confess, sir, that the magnitude of the object before us filled our minds with awe and apprehension. . . . Can it then be a subject for surprise that with the sensations indispensably excited by so comprehensive and so arduous an undertaking, we should for a moment yield to despondency, and at length, influenced by the spirit of conciliation, resort to mutual concession, as the only means to obtain the great end for which we were convened? Is it a matter of surprise that where the springs of dissension were so numerous, and so powerful, some force was requisite to impel them to take, in a collected state, a direction different from that which separately they would have pursued?

There was another reason, that in this respect, increased the different tempers and dispositions of the people for whom they acted. But, however widely they may differ upon other topics, they cordially agree in that keen and elevated sense of freedom and independence, which has been manifested in their united and successful opposition to one of the most powerful kingdoms of the world. Still it was apprehended by some, that their abhorrence of constraint would be the source of objection and opposition; but, I confess, that my opinion, formed upon a knowledge of the good sense, as well as the high spirit of my constituents, made me confident that they would esteem that government to be the best, which was best calculated eventually to establish and secure the dignity and happiness of their country. . . .

These difficulties, Mr. President, which embarrassed the Federal Convention are not represented to enhance the merit of surmounting them, but with a more important view, to show how unreasonable it is to expect that the plan of government should correspond with the wishes of all the states, of all the citizens of any one state, or of all the citizens of the united continent. I remember well, sir, the effect of those surrounding difficulties in the late Convention. At one time the great and interesting work seemed to be at a stand, at another it proceeded with energy and rapidity, and when at last, it was accomplished, many respectable members beheld it with wonder and admiration. . . .

. . . It was not alone the State of Pennsylvania, however important she may be as a constituent part of the Union, that could influence the deliberations of a Convention, formed by a delegation from all the United States, to devise a government adequate to their common exigencies and impartial in its influence and operation. In the spirit of union, inculcated by the nature of their commission, they framed the Constitution before us, and in the same spirit, they submit it to the candid consideration of their constituents. . . .

1. Taken from Alexander J. Dallas' version of James Wilson's speech.

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