



CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION

csac.history.wisc.edu > Ratification at a Glance > Rhode Island > Significant Outcomes > Commentaries on the Referendum

A Federalist

Massachusetts Centinel, 15 March 1788

Mr. [Benjamin] RUSSELL, In your last, you lay before the publick the following paragraph: “The General Assembly of the State of Rhode-Island, the 1st inst. passed an act, *‘for submitting the consideration of the proposed Federal Constitution to the freemen of that State’*—who are to meet in their respective towns, in town-Conventions, on the FOURTH MONDAY of March; (the 24th instant) when after discussing it, they are to give their assent or disapprobation of it by yeas and nays; which are to be sealed up by the Town-Clerk and forwarded to the General Assembly, at their meeting on the last Monday in March:—Provision was sometime since made for the distribution of the Constitution.”

My sensations on reading the above paragraph were very different from yours, if we are to judge of them by your declaration, that “We are *happy* in being able to assure the publick that the above paragraph is *authentick*.”^(a) I do not indeed at all question the truth of it, for it carries on the face of it, such strong features of resemblance to the whole tenour of the conduct of the General Assembly of that State, respecting our national affairs, that independent of your vouching for its authenticity, I should venture to declare it the genuine offspring of that body. ANTIFEDERALISM is written in capitals upon it. The Continental Convention have resolved, “That the Constitution be laid before the United States in Congress assembled, and that it is *their* opinion that it should afterwards be submitted to a *Convention of DELEGATES*, chosen in each State, by the people thereof, under the recommendation of their legislature, for their assent and ratification, and that each *Convention*, assenting to and ratifying the same, should give notice thereof to the United States in Congress assembled.” In consequence Congress resolve, “That the said report, with the resolutions and letters accompanying the same, be transmitted to the several legislatures, in order to be submitted to a *Convention of Delegates* chosen in each State by the people thereof, in *conformity* to the resolves of the Convention made and provided in that case.”

Now, Mr. Russell, is there a single feature of federalism in this procedure of the General Assembly of our little perverse sister? Can we conceive it possible that *they* should suppose it was consistent with the design of the Continental Convention, composed of a fair representation of every State in the union, (Rhode-Island excepted) or of the United States in Congress assembled, to submit the plan of a national government to be “discussed” by the people of any State *immediately* in their *disconnected* condition, at their several *town-meetings*? Was it their intention to call upon the people, thus to assent to and ratify a system of government, formed upon the most mature deliberation, upon the state of our national concerns, and a comparative view of the interests, habits, customs and laws of the several States in this union? Is not the absurdity of

this conduct so obvious as to render a serious endeavour to point it out, useless, if not ridiculous? A people may be thus lead on *blindfold* to their own *perdition*. Why then was this measure adopted by the General Assembly of Rhode-Island? Because they still are the same antifederal Assembly they have long been—Paper Money and Know Yes are still their favourites.—They perceive the adoption of the federal government, will put an end to their abominable practices committed under the cloak of law.—They fear that the federal Constitution, if considered fairly, in a Convention of Delegates chosen by the people, will be vindicated against all the objections that the enemies of truth, justice, order and good government have brought against it.—They have seen the effect that such a publick examination, into the real interests of the members of this great union, and the real principles of the federal Constitution hath had in this State—They apprehend that many who are opposed to the Constitution in its present form, should the people be assembled together by their delegates, might be reconciled to its ratification, by adopting the plan of the recommendatory amendments of our Convention.—They knew no amendments can be agreed upon by the people, if they are called upon for their assent, and ratification in the unconnected separate manner now proposed to them—They likewise knew that by thus submitting it to the people, it would give an opportunity for the dealers of misrepresentations to impose upon and prejudice the publick mind against it—that therefore the chance of obtaining its rejection is much greater in this mode of procedure, than in that proposed by the Continental Convention, and by the United States in Congress assembled. Upon such like motives as these, I am alone able to account for the conduct of the General Assembly of Rhode-Island, in refusing or neglecting to adopt the above mode of obtaining the ratification of the federal Constitution, by the people of that State. I must differ therefore from your informant, “That the mode adopted in Rhode-Island is most likely to insure the ratification of the Constitution there,” though it is wished that such may be the effect, by yours, A FEDERALIST.

March, 10, 1788.

(a) *Our happiness was not derived from the consideration that this mode of submitting the American Constitution to their constituents, was adopted by the Legislature of Rhode-Island, but from the circumstance of this system being laid before the People of ALL the States, by the legislatures thereof. It would not have added to our pleasure, if the legislature of Rhode-Island had complied with the recommendation of the Convention—for even her ACCEPTING and RATIFYING it, is an event which can hardly be seriously desired—and, but for the sake of the virtuous MINORITY in that district, her REJECTION of the Constitution would, by honest men, be a “consummation devoutly to be wished.”*¹

1. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act III, scene 1, lines 62–63.

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. XXIV: Rhode Island [1] (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2011), 140–42.