

A Rhode-Island Landholder, Providence *United States Chronicle*, 20 March 1788

To the FREEMEN of the State of RHODE-ISLAND, &c.

The Honorable General Assembly, at their last Session, passed an act appointing "*the fourth Monday of this month, for all the Freemen to convene, in their respective towns, in town-meetings, to deliberate upon, and to determine, each individual by himself, by poll, whether the Constitution for the United States, agreed upon by the Convention, at Philadelphia, the 17th of September last, shall be adopted or negatived.*"

The author of the following observations upon this measure, hopes they will not offend, when he solemnly declares that they originate from the purest motives of disinterested regard, for the real happiness and welfare of the State at large. The principal reason assigned in the preamble to this act for the measure is, that the General Assembly cannot make innovations in the Constitution of the State, without the express consent of the Freemen, by their own voices, individually taken, in town-meetings. Nothing is more true. The General Assembly have no such power. They cannot make any alteration whatever, in the form of the government which brings them together, merely to act for the good of their constituents, agreeably to the Constitution by which they are convened. But it by no means follows, from these premises, that the people ought to have been called upon individually, to decide on the national Constitution, in the manner above mentioned. I shall be asked—*How then are the People to be consulted?* I answer, by the whole body of the People being individually notified to assemble, at their usual places of meeting, in their respective towns, at a certain time—then and there to choose wise, virtuous and honest men, in whom they can confide, to represent them, in a Convention of the whole.—Here is the beginning of government, originating from the individual act of every Freeman, after having agreed to this great republican principle, *that the vote of the majority shall be binding on the whole*. This is the only true and rational mode of taking the voice of the People, on any question, affecting the constitutional form of their government. For it is absurd to suppose, that one part of the community should be bound by a decision against them in another part, where they are *unheard and unrepresented*.—It is like a trial and condemnation *without hearing the party*.

The most natural and simple idea of government is that of the People's assembling together, *in their own persons*, for consulting, debating and enacting laws, and forming regulations which are to be binding on all, and by which the general liberty, property and safety are provided for. But such a scheme of government can be compatible only with a very small district. In a State no larger than ours, it is impossible to assemble together the whole body of the People, in a deliberative capacity, so as to avoid confusion; and to obtain the unconstrained opinion of a majority, recourse must necessarily be had to an adequate and freely elected REPRESENTATION.

And do the People lose of their respect and dignity by such a *Representation*? No.—They augment it:—They thereby become something more than themselves:—They obtain the assembled majesty of the whole centred.—And what can be imagined more

august, than a numerous set of wise, virtuous, free, and honest men, sitting, in consultation, on the means of promoting, establishing and securing the happiness of the whole? The People of themselves can effect nothing without Representation—unless it be to destroy a government: They cannot exercise the powers of government in person:—By their Representatives they deliberate and determine, and by their servants THEY govern:—Their voice, strong and powerful in this way, pervades every part of the community. The People are therefore gainers by the election of Representatives.—To a CONVENTION *of the Representatives of the whole People* we are therefore naturally led, as the only way of obtaining their collected sense and wisdom.

But as the General Assembly have pointed out another mode, what is to be done?—I answer, that I have as high a respect for all legislative proceedings as any man. I know the importance to society of having their Legislature duly honoured, and their just laws respected; I know the Assembly of this State, as is natural, wish to please, while they serve their constituents in the manner they think will be most acceptable; and I have no doubt but they have sincerely at heart, what they suppose will be for the real good and happiness of the great body of the People: But where is the Legislature who never made a mistake in their measures?—Do we not remember mistakes acknowledged on all sides, in enacting the Penal Laws of 1786,¹ respecting the paper money, which answered no good purpose, and were repealed without having ever been executed? I hope it will not give offence to any Member of either House of Assembly to observe, that this measure of calling for the individual yeas and nays, on the national Constitution, in the town-meetings, without a discussion of it, in a Convention *may* be wrong.—Did I not suppose it big with mischievous consequences to the State, I should not have troubled the Freemen with this address. But as I am clearly of opinion that it will not be prudent or honorable for those who wish for any national government (which I trust we all do) to negative this Constitution, unless they propose something else in lieu of it; and supposing that there are many who have objections, and who will not agree to it without amendments, I have been induced to solicit my fellow-citizens to think for themselves—to be cautious of the ground they tread upon—to look before they leap—to exercise candour towards each other—to think coolly and dispassionately—to “*speak their minds, and yet be not divided;*”—knowing that we are all on board of the same ship, and that rash and indiscreet proceedings will injure the voyage.

I therefore proceed to observe, that this act merely appoints the day for the People to assemble to give their voices for or against the Constitution, if they see fit, without even *requiring* them to vote: So that it is altogether matter of choice whether they will give in their votes as proposed or not.—This being the case, will it not be best to follow the example already set by the Town of Little-Compton,³ of instructing our Representatives to apply to the General Assembly for an act recommending it to the several towns in the State, to elect Delegates to meet in a general Convention, for the purpose of freely discussing the proposed national Constitution?

The Convention may be appointed to assemble in May next, if it is thought we shall have influence enough with the other States who have not already acted upon the Constitution to obtain such alterations or amendments as the Convention of this State might propose. The circumstances of the Union may possibly be such at that time, that

this State, if put in a proper situation, may have it in her power to obtain such amendments:—She hath as good right to propose them as her sister Massachusetts.— She will thereby make herself of some consequence. But without a Convention, she will appear inoperatively insignificant—it being impossible for the People in any other way to act as a body, or to make any propositions whatever. But if it is supposed that she cannot materially influence the decisions of the States who have not already taken up the business, the time of the Convention may be postponed to September or October next, when it is probable it will have been decided upon by all the other States, so that she may then conduct as shall appear most rational and prudent.

What benefits can possibly arise from voting on the Constitution in the manner proposed by this Act?—It cannot be considered as decisive, even if a majority of the Freemen should appear to vote upon the question.—For as the People will not act in their assembled collective capacity, the vote will not be binding; and those who do not vote at all, or are dissatisfied with the determination, will have a right of themselves to propose and to hold a Convention, if they can, *at any time hereafter* obtain a majority of the Freemen to concur with them.—This however would tend to introduce animosity, disturbance and confusion. It will be disagreeable to many to become opposed to a *formidable phalanx* of their suspicious, offended neighbours, and to have their names returned as proposed by the act, not knowing to what inconveniences it may subject them in the warmth of party zeal.—This measure therefore tends to bias the minds of the people not to act agreeable to their real judgment and sentiments, and (if voting at all) to fall in with the strongest side.—This act was opposed in its progress, in both Houses of Assembly.—A majority of the Legislature however chose to refer the business in this way, without recommending a Convention, in order that the People might do what appeared to them to be right. The way is therefore open for the People themselves to call for a Convention. The People in their collective capacity must certainly sooner or later take up the matter: Will it not then be best for them at once to instruct their Deputies to recommend a Convention, without deciding themselves individually on the question?

Let us a moment consider on what ground we stand.—Six States have already adopted the Constitution, viz.—Massachusetts, Connecticut, New-Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware and Georgia:—Three unanimously:—Connecticut by a majority of more than four to one:—Pennsylvania by a majority of two to one: Massachusetts by a smaller majority—but with the general acquiescence and satisfaction of her People. And what are the accounts from the other States, all of whom have called Conventions? That there is the utmost probability that it will be finally adopted by them all. For *Centinel*, *Philadelphensis*, and some other inflammatory writers grossly misrepresent matters.— Most probably some amendments will be introduced, perhaps the same, or some which are similar to those proposed by Massachusetts.⁴ Will the sensible and discerning citizens then of this small, but important State to the Union, now proceed to tie their hands, by giving in their yeas and nays, to be recorded in the manner proposed?—Will they thus exclude themselves from the privilege of proposing and insisting on amendments?—Will not this State assist her sister Massachusetts in establishing those amendments she has offered, dictated by wisdom and sound policy?—And do we feel ourselves so sufficiently informed of the different interests, habits, customs and laws of the several States,

collectively, comparatively and individually considered, and of the consequences of our refusing to assist in forming a system of government for the whole, as to be willing to decide upon this important matter, *individually, in a town-meeting*, without a public investigation of it, by a general Convention of the State?—An astonishing revolution is taking place all around us, in the peaceable erection of a new Confederacy, in which we are invited to join, and shall THE PEOPLE not be allowed an opportunity of publicly and unitedly deliberating and consulting together in a Convention, whether it be best to join therein or not? It will certainly be best for us to keep ourselves at liberty, and in such a situation that we may be of some consequence in the Union. Who knows but this State, small as she is, if she does not tie her hands in this preposterous and extraordinary manner, by conducting her influence with prudence and discretion in a Convention, may yet like an umpire or balancing power, propose measures which all will finally agree to. To bind ourselves by recorded yeas and nays, as proposed, will answer no good purpose: It will excite jealousies and uneasiness among the People, not knowing the grounds and motives of each others conduct, and greatly embarrass us with perplexity and confusion.

I do not advocate the proposed new Constitution, nor give my opinion of the expediency of adopting it as it is; because the merits of it are not now under consideration.—I wish for amendments, and doubt not *they may be obtained*, at least those proposed by Massachusetts, if a Convention is seasonably called. It may however not be amiss to observe, that it can be most abundantly and satisfactorily shewn, that from the local and other circumstances of this State, no one in the Union will derive *so great advantages* from the present proposed new Confederacy.

As I most sincerely wish for the prosperity and happiness of the great body of the People of this State, I am therefore anxious that they should not be led into this mistaken measure of voting on the Constitution by their individual yeas and nays—which there is the strongest reasons to suppose will be attended with bad consequences. Had we been represented in the Convention at Philadelphia, we should undoubtedly have been on a better footing in many respects in the new Confederacy than we now are, especially with respect to representation. What may be the consequences of our totally rejecting the proposed Constitution, should it be adopted by the other States, I know not.—It is probable that our situation will not be very eligible. Let me then recommend to my fellow-citizens not to fetter themselves with recorded yeas and nays in this unheard-of, unprecedented manner: But at the day appointed for their meeting let them assemble in their respective towns, and in a suitable and decent manner express their wishes to the General Assembly, by instructions to their Representatives, for calling a Convention, where we may have the collected sense and wisdom of the State, and thereby be of some consequence in determining the great and important measures, now in agitation, and have it in our power to act as prudence, policy and patriotism may dictate.

March 18th, 1788.

P. S. As the Chronicle is circulated in every town in the State, will it be deemed presumption unpardonable, in the author of this address, to request any gentleman, possessing similar sentiments, to communicate them as generally as may be at the town-meetings respectively?

Published in Volume XXIV of *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution, Rhode Island*, Vol. 1, edited by John P. Kaminski, Charles H. Schoenleber, Gaspare J. Saladino, Richard Leffler, Jonathan M. Reid, Margaret R. Flamingo, Patrick T. Conley, Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2011.