

Charles Pinckney, Speech in the Ratification Convention, 14 May 1788

Mr. President, after so much has been said with respect to the powers possessed by the late Convention to form and propose a new system--after so many observations have been made on its leading principles, as well in the House of Representatives as in the conventions of other states, whose proceedings have been published--it will be as unnecessary for me again minutely to examine a subject which has been so thoroughly investigated, as it would be difficult to carry you into a field that has not been sufficiently explored.

Having, however, had the honor of being associated in the delegation from this state, and presuming upon the indulgence of the house, I shall proceed to make some observations which appear to me necessary to a full and candid discussion of the system now before us.

It seems to be generally confessed that, of all sciences, that of government, or politics, is the most difficult. In the old world, as far as the lights of history extend, from the earliest ages to our own, we find nations in the constant exercise of all the forms with which the world is at present furnished. We have seen among the ancients, as well as the moderns, monarchies, limited and absolute, aristocracies, republics of a single state, and federal unions. But notwithstanding all their experience, how confined and imperfect is their knowledge of government! how little is the true doctrine of representation understood! how few states enjoy what we call freedom! how few governments answer those great ends of public happiness which we seem to expect from our own!

In reviewing such of the European states as we are best acquainted with, we may with truth assert that there is but one among the most important which confirms to its citizens their civil liberties, or provides for the security of private rights. But as if it had been fated that we should be the first perfectly free people the world had ever seen, even the government I have alluded to withholds from a part of its subjects the equal enjoyment of their religious liberties. How many thousands of the subjects of Great Britain at this moment labor under civil disabilities, merely on account of their religious persuasions! To the liberal and enlightened mind, the rest of Europe affords a melancholy picture of the depravity of human nature, and of the total subversion of those rights, without which we should suppose no people could be happy or content.

We have been taught here to believe that full power of right belongs to the people; that it flows immediately from them, and is delegated to their officers for the public good; that our rulers are the servants of the people, amenable to their will, and created for their use. How different are the governments of Europe! There the people are the servants and subjects of their rulers; there merit and talents have little or no influence; but all the honors and offices of government are swallowed up by birth, by fortune, or by rank.

From the European world are no precedents to be drawn for a people who think they are capable of governing themselves. Instead of receiving instruction from them, we may, with pride, affirm that, new as this country is in point of settlement, inexperienced as she must be

upon questions of government, she still has read more useful lessons to the old world, she has made them more acquainted with their own rights, than they had been otherwise for centuries. It is with pride I repeat that, old and experienced as they are, they are indebted to us for light and refinement upon points of all others the most interesting

Had the American revolution not happened, would Ireland enjoy her present rights of commerce and legislation? Would the subjects of the emperor in the Netherlands have presumed to contend for, and ultimately to secure, the privileges they demanded? Would the parliaments of France have resisted the edicts of their monarch, and justified in a language that will do honor to the freest people? Nay, I may add, would a becoming sense of liberty, and of the rights of mankind, have so generally pervaded that kingdom, had not their knowledge of America led them to the investigation? Undoubtedly not. Let it be therefore our boast that we have already taught some of the oldest and wisest nations to explore their rights as men; and let it be our prayer that the effects of the revolution may never cease to operate until they have unshackled all the nations that have firmness to resist the fetters of despotism. Without a precedent, and with the experience of but a few years, were the Convention called upon to form a system for a people differing from all others we are acquainted with.

The first knowledge necessary for us to acquire, was a knowledge of the people for whom this system was to be formed; for unless we were acquainted with their situation, their habits, opinions, and resources, it would be impossible to form a government upon adequate or practicable principles.

If we examine the reasons which have given rise to the distinctions of rank that at present prevail in Europe, we shall find that none of them do, or in all probability ever will exist in the Union.

The only distinction that may take place is that of wealth. Riches, no doubt, will ever have their influence; and where they are suffered to increase to large amounts in a few hands, there they may become dangerous to the public--particularly when, from the cheapness of labor and the scarcity of money, a great proportion of the people are poor. These, however, are dangers that I think we have very little to apprehend, for these reasons: One is from the destruction of the right of primogeniture; by which means, the estates of intestates are equally to be divided among all their children--a provision no less consonant to the principles of a republican government, than it is to those of general equity and parental affection. To endeavor to raise a name by accumulating property in one branch of a family, at the expense of others equally related and deserving, is a vanity no less unjust and cruel than dangerous to the interests of liberty: it is a practice no wise state will ever encourage or tolerate. In the Northern and Eastern States, such distinctions among children are seldom heard of. Laws have been long since passed in all of them, destroying the right of primogeniture; and as laws never fail to have a powerful influence upon the manners of a people, we may suppose that, in future, an equal division of property among children will, in general, take place in all the states, and one means of amassing inordinate wealth in the hands of individuals be, as it ought, forever removed.

Another reason is that, in the Eastern and Northern States, the landed property is nearly equally divided: very few have large bodies, and there are few that have not small tracts,

The greater part of the people are employed in cultivating their own lands; the rest in handicraft and commerce. They are frugal in their manner of living. Plain tables, clothing, and furniture, prevail in their houses, and expensive appearances are avoided. Among the landed interest, it may be truly said there are few of them rich, and few of them very poor; nor, while the states are capable of supporting so many more inhabitants than they contain at present--while so vast a territory on our frontier remains uncultivated and unexplored--while the means of subsistence are so much within every man's power--are those dangerous distinctions of fortune to be expected which at present prevail in other countries.

The people of the Union may be classed as follows: Commercial men, who will be of consequence or not, in the political scale, as commerce may be made an object of the attention of government. As far as I am able to judge, and presuming that proper sentiments will ultimately prevail upon this subject, it does not appear to me that the commercial line will ever have much influence in the politics of the Union. Foreign trade is one of the enemies against which we must be extremely guarded--more so than against any other, as none will ever have a more unfavorable operation. I consider it as the root of our present public distress--as the plentiful source from which our future national calamities will flow, unless great care is taken to prevent it. Divided as we are from the old world, we should have nothing to do with their politics, and as little as possible with their commerce: they can never improve, but must inevitably corrupt us.

Another class is that of professional men, who, from their education and pursuits, must ever have a considerable influence, while your government retains the republican principle, and its affairs are agitated in assemblies of the people.

The third, with whom I will connect the mechanical, as generally attached to them, are the landed interest--the owners and cultivators of the soil--the men attached to the truest interests of their country from those motives which always bind and secure the affections of the nation. In these consists the great body of the people; and here rests, and I hope ever will continue, all the authority of the government.

I remember once to have seen, in the writings of a very celebrated author upon national wealth, the following remarks: "Finally," says he, "there are but three ways for a nation to acquire wealth. The first is by war, as the Romans did in plundering their conquered neighbors: this is robbery. The second is by commerce, which is generally cheating. The third is by agriculture, the only honest way, wherein a man receives a real increase of the seed thrown into the ground, in a kind of continual miracle wrought by the hand of God in his favor, as a reward for his innocent life and virtuous industry."

I do not agree with him so far as to suppose that commerce is generally cheating. I think there are some kinds of commerce not only fair and valuable, but such as ought to be encouraged by

government, I agree with him in this general principle--that all the great objects of government should be subservient to the increase of agriculture and the support of the landed interest, and that commerce should only be so far attended to, as it may serve to improve and strengthen them; that the object of a republic is to render its citizens virtuous and happy; and that an unlimited foreign commerce can seldom fail to have a contrary tendency.

These classes compose the people of the Union; and, fortunately for their harmony, they may be said in a great measure to be connected with and dependent upon each other.

The merchant is dependent upon the planter, as the purchaser of his imports, and as furnishing him with the means of his remittances. The professional men depend upon both for employment in their respective pursuits, and are, in their turn, useful to both. The landholder, though the most independent of the three, is still, in some measure, obliged to the merchant for furnishing him at home with a ready sale for his productions.

From this mutual dependence, and the statement I have made respecting the situation of the people of the Union, I am led to conclude that mediocrity of fortune is a leading feature in our national character; that most of the causes which lead to destructions of fortune among other nations being removed, and causes of equality existing with us which are not to be found among them, we may with safety assert that the great body of national wealth is nearly equally in the hands of the people, among whom there are few dangerously rich or few miserably poor; that we may congratulate ourselves with living under the blessings of a mild and equal government, which knows no distinctions but those of merits or talents--under a government whose honors and offices are equally open to the exertions of all her citizens, and which adopts virtue and worth for her own, wheresoever she can find them.

Another distinguishing feature in our Union is its division into individual states, differing in extent of territory, manners, population, and products.

Those who are acquainted with the Eastern States, the reason of their original migration, and their pursuits, habits, and principles, well know that they are essentially different from those of the Middle and Southern States; that they retain all those opinions respecting religion and government which first induced their ancestors to cross the Atlantic; and that they are, perhaps, more purely republican in habits and sentiment than any other part of the Union. The inhabitants of New York and the eastern part of New Jersey--originally Dutch settlements seem to have altered less than might have been expected in the course of a century; indeed, the greatest part of New York may still be considered as a Dutch settlement, the people in the interior country generally using that language in their families, and having very little varied their ancient customs. Pennsylvania and Delaware are nearly one half inhabited by Quakers, whose passive principles upon questions of government, and rigid opinions in private, render them extremely different from the citizens either of the Eastern or Southern States. Maryland was Originally a Roman Catholic colony, and a great number of their inhabitants, some of them the most wealthy and cultivated, are still of this persuasion. It is unnecessary for me to state the striking difference in sentiment and habit which must always exist between the Independents

of the East the Calvinists and Quakers of the Middle States, and the Roman Catholics of Maryland; but striking as this is, it is not to be compared with the difference that there is between the inhabitants of the Northern and Southern States. When I say Southern, I mean Maryland, and the states to the southward of her. Here we may truly observe, that Nature has drawn as strong marks of distinction in the habits and manners of the people as she has in her climates and productions. The southern citizen beholds, with a kind of surprise, the simple manners of the east, and is too often induced to entertain undeserved opinions of the apparent purity of the Quaker; while they, in their turn, seem concerned at what they term the extravagance and dissipation of their southern friends, and reprobate, as unpardonable moral and political evil, the dominion they hold over a part of the human race. The inconveniences which too frequently attend these differences in habits and opinions among the citizens that compose the Union, are not a little increased by the variety of their state governments; for, as I have already observed, the constitution or laws under which a people live never fail to have a powerful effect upon the manners. We know that all the states have adhered, in their forms, to the republican principle, though they have differed widely in their opinions of the mode best calculated to preserve it.

In Pennsylvania and Georgia, the whole powers of government are lodged in a legislative body, of a single branch, over which there is no control; nor are their executives or judicials, from their connection and necessary dependence on the legislature, capable of strictly executing their respective offices. In all the other states, except Maryland, Massachusetts, and New York, they are only so far improved as to have a legislature with two branches, which completely involve and swallow up all the powers of their government. In neither of these are the judicial or executive placed in that firm or independent situation which can alone secure the safety of the people or the just administration of the laws. In Maryland, one branch of their legislature is a Senate, chosen, for five years, by electors chosen by the people. The knowledge and firmness which this body have, upon all occasions, displayed, not only in the exercise of their legislative duties, but in withstanding and defeating such of the projects of the other house as appeared to them founded in local and personal motives, have long since convinced me that the Senate of Maryland is the best model of a senate that has yet been offered to the Union; that it is capable of correcting many of the vices of the other parts of their Constitution, and, in a great measure, atoning for those defects which, in common with the states I have mentioned, are but too evident in their execution--the want of stability and independence in the judicial and executive departments.

In Massachusetts, we find the principle of legislation more improved by the revisionary power which is given to their governor, and the independence of their judges.

In New York, the same improvement in legislation has taken place as in Massachusetts; but here, from the executive's being elected by the great body of the people; holding his office for three years, and being reëligible; from the appointment to offices being taken from the legislature and placed in a select council,--I think their Constitution is, upon the whole, the best in the Union. Its faults are the want of permanent salaries to their judges, and giving to their executive the nomination to offices, which is, in fact, giving him the appointment.

It does not, however, appear to me, that this can be called a vice of their system, as I have always been of opinion that the insisting upon the right to nominate was a usurpation of their executive's, not warranted by the letter or meaning of their Constitution.

These are the outlines of their various forms, in few of which are their executive or judicial departments wisely constructed, or that solid distinction adopted between the branches of their legislative which can alone provide for the influence of different principles in their operation.

Much difficulty was expected from the extent of country to be governed. All the republics We read of, either in the ancient or modern world, have been extremely limited in territory. We know of none a tenth part so large as the United States; indeed, we are hardly able to determine, from the lights we are furnished with, whether the governments we have heard of under the names of republics really deserved them, or whether the ancients ever had any just or proper ideas upon the subject. Of the doctrine of representation, the fundamental of a republic, they certainly were ignorant. If they were in possession of any other safe or practicable principles, they have long since been lost and forgotten to the world. Among the other honors, therefore, that have been reserved for the American Union, not the least considerable of them is that of defining a mixed system, by which a people may govern themselves, possessing all the virtues and benefits, and avoiding all the dangers and inconveniences, of the three simple forms.

I have said that the ancient confederacies, as far as we are acquainted with them, covered up an inconsiderable territory.

Among the moderns, in our sense of the word, there is no such system as a confederate republic. There are, indeed, some small states whose interior governments are democratic; but these are too inconsiderable to afford information. The Swiss cantons are only connected by alliances; the Germanic body is merely an association of potentates, most of them absolute in their own dominions; and as to the United Netherlands, it is such a confusion of states and assemblies, that I have always been at loss what species of government to term it. According to my idea of the word, it is not a republic; for I conceive it as indispensable, in a republic, that all authority should flow from the people. In the United Netherlands, the people have no interference either in the election of their magistrate or in the affairs of government. From the experiment, therefore, never having been fairly made, opinions have been entertained, and sanctioned by high authorities, that republics are only suited to small societies. This opinion has its advocates among all those who, not having a sufficient share of industry or talents to investigate for themselves, easily adopt the opinions of such authors as are supposed to have written with ability upon the subject; but I am led to believe other opinions begin to prevail--opinions more to be depended upon, because they result from juster principles.

We begin now to suppose that the evils of a republic -- dissension, tumult, and faction--are more dangerous in small societies than in large confederate states. In the first, the people are easily assembled and inflamed--are always exposed to those convulsive tumults of infatuation

and enthusiasm which often overturn all public order. In the latter, the multitude will be less imperious, and consequently less inconstant, because the extensive territory of each republic, and the number of citizens, will not permit them all to be assembled at one time and in one place: the sphere of government being enlarged, it will not easily be in the power of factious and designing men to infect the whole people; it will give an opportunity to the more temperate and prudent part of the society to correct the licentiousness and injustice of the rest. We have strong proofs of the truth of this opinion in the examples of Rhode Island and Massachusetts--instances which have, perhaps, been critically afforded by an all-merciful Providence to evince the truth of a position extremely important to our present inquiries. In the former, the most contracted society in the Union, we have seen their licentiousness so far prevail as to seize the reins of government, and oppress the people by laws the most infamous that have ever disgraced a civilized nation. In the latter, where the sphere was enlarged, similar attempts have been rendered abortive by the zeal and activity of those who were opposed to them.

As the Constitution before you is intended to represent states as well as citizens, I have thought it necessary to make these remarks, because there are, no doubt, a great number of the members of this body, who, from their particular pursuits, have not had an opportunity of minutely investigating them, and because it will be impossible for the house fairly to determine whether the government is a proper one or not, unless they are in some degree acquainted with the people and the states, for whose use it is instituted.

For a people thus situated is a government to be formed--a people who have the justest opinion of their civil and religious rights, and who have risked every thing in asserting and defending them.

In every government there necessarily exists a power from which there is no appeal, and which, for that reason, may be formed absolute and uncontrollable.

The person or assembly in whom this power resides is called the sovereign or supreme power of the state. With us, the sovereignty of the Union is in the people.

One of the best political and moral writers (Paley, a deacon of Carlisle--vol. ii. 174, 175) I have met with, enumerates three principal forms of government, which, he says, are to be regarded rather as the simple forms, by some combination and intermixture of which all actual governments are composed, than as any where existing in a pure and elementary state. These forms are, --

- 1st. Despotism, or absolute monarchy, where the legislature is in a single person.
- 2d. An aristocracy, where the legislature is in a select assembly, the members of which either fill up, by election, the vacancies in their own body, or succeed to it by inheritance, property, tenure of lands, or in respect of some personal right or qualification.

- 3d. A republic, where the people at large, either collectively or by representation, form the legislature.

The separate advantages of monarchy are unity of council, decision, secrecy, and despatch; the military strength and energy resulting from these qualities of government; the exclusion of popular and aristocratical contentions; the preventing, by a known rule of succession, all competition for the supreme power, thereby repressing the dangerous hopes and intrigues of aspiring citizens.

The dangers of a monarchy are tyranny, expense, exactions, military dominations, unnecessary wars, ignorance, in the governors, of the interest and accommodation of all people, and a consequent deficiency of salutary regulations; want of constancy and uniformity in the rules of government, and, proceeding from thence, insecurity of persons and property.

The separate advantage of an aristocracy is the wisdom that may be expected from experience and education. A permanent council naturally possesses experience, and the members will always be educated with a view to the stations they are destined by their birth to occupy.

The mischiefs of an aristocracy are dissensions in the ruling orders of the state; an oppression of the lower orders by the privilege of the higher, and by laws partial to the separate interests of the law-makers.

The advantages of a republic are liberty, exemption from needless restrictions, equal laws, public spirit, averseness to war, frugality, above all, the opportunities afforded, to men of every description, of producing their abilities and counsels to public observation, and the exciting to the service of the commonwealth the faculties of its best citizens.

The evils of a republic are dissensions, tumults, faction, the attempts of ambitious citizens to possess power, the confusion and clamor which are the inevitable consequences of propounding questions of state to the discussion of large popular assemblies, the delay and disclosure of the public councils, and too often the imbecility of the laws.

A mixed government is composed by the combination of two or more of the simple forms above described; and in whatever proportion each form enters into the constitution of government, in the same proportion may both the advantages and evils which have been attributed to that form be expected.

The citizens of the United States would reprobate, with indignation, the idea of a monarchy. But the essential qualities of a monarchy--unity of council, vigor, secrecy, and despatch--are qualities essential in every government.

While, therefore, we have reserved to the people, the fountain of all power, the periodical election of their first magistrate,--while we have defined his powers, and bound them to such limits as will effectually prevent his usurping authorities dangerous to the general welfare,--we

have, at the same time, endeavored to infuse into this department that degree of vigor which will enable the President to execute the laws with energy and despatch.

By constructing the Senate upon rotative principles, we have removed, as will be shown upon another occasion, all danger of an aristocratic influence; while, by electing the members for six years, we hope we have given to this part of the system all the advantages of an aristocracy--wisdom, experience, and a consistency of measures.

The House of Representatives, in which the people of the Union are proportionably represented, are to be biennially elected by them. Those appointments are sufficiently short to render the member as dependent as he ought to be upon his constituents.

They are the moving-spring of the system. With them all grants of money are to originate: on them depend the wars we shall be engaged in, the fleets and armies we shall raise and support, the salaries we shall pay; in short, on them depend the appropriations of money, and consequently all the arrangements of government. With this powerful influence of the purse, they will be always able to restrain the usurpations of the other departments, while their own licentiousness will, in its turn, be checked and corrected by them.

I trust that, when we proceed to review the system by sections, it will be found to contain all those necessary provisions and restraints, which, while they enable the general government to guard and protect our common rights as a nation, to restore to us those blessings of commerce and mutual confidence which have been so long removed and impaired, will secure to us those rights, which, as the citizens of a state, will make us happy and content at home--as the citizens of the Union, respectable abroad.

How different, Mr. President, is this government constructed from any we have known among us!

In their individual capacities as citizens, the people are proportionably represented in the House of Representatives. Here they who are to pay to support the expenses of government, have the purse-strings in their hands; here the people hold, and feel that they possess, an influence sufficiently powerful to prevent every undue attempt of the other branches, to maintain that weight in the political scale which, as the source of all authority, they should ever possess; here, too, the states, whose existence as such we have often heard predicted as precarious, will find, in the Senate, the guards of their rights as political associations.

On them (I mean the state systems) rests the general fabric: on their foundation is this magnificent structure of freedom erected, each depending upon, supporting, and protecting the other: nor--so intimate is the connection--can the one be removed without prostrating the other in ruin: like the head and the body, separate them and they die.

Far be it from me to suppose that such an attempt should ever be made: the good sense and virtue of our country forbid the idea. To the Union we will look up, as to the temple of our

freedom--a temple founded in the affections, and supported by the virtue, of the people. Here we will pour out our gratitude to the Author of all good, for suffering us to participate in the rights of a people who govern themselves. Is there, at this moment, a nation upon earth that enjoys this right, where the true principles of representation. are understood and practised, and where all authority flows from, and returns at stated periods to, the people? I answer, there is not. Can a government be said to be free where these rights do not exist? It cannot. On what depends the enjoyment of these rare, these inestimable privileges? On the firmness, on the power, of the Union to protect and defend them.

How grateful, then, should we be, that, at this important period,--a period important, not to us alone, but to the general rights of mankind,--so much harmony and concession should prevail throughout the states; that the public opinion should be so much actuated by candor, and an attention to their general interests; that, disdaining to be governed by the narrow motives of state policy, they have liberally determined to dedicate a part of their advantages to the support of that government from which they received them! To fraud, to force, or accident, all the governments we know have owed their births. To the philosophic mind, how new and awful an instance do the United States at present exhibit in the political world! They exhibit, sir, the first instance of a people, who, being dissatisfied with their government,--unattacked by foreign force, and undisturbed by domestic uneasiness,--coolly and deliberately resort to the virtue and good sense of their country, for a correction of their public errors.

It must be obvious that, without a superintending government, it is impossible the liberties of this country can long be secured.

Single and unconnected, how weak and contemptible are the largest of our states!--how unable to protect themselves from external or domestic insult! How incompetent to national purposes would even partial union be!--how liable to intestine wars and confusion!--how little able to secure the blessings of peace!

Let us, therefore, be careful in strengthening the Union. Let us remember that we are bounded by vigilant and attentive neighbors, who view with a jealous eye our rise to empire.

Let us remember that we are bound, in gratitude to our northern brethren, to aid them in the recovery of those rights which they have lost in obtaining for us an extension of our commerce, and the security of our liberties. Let us not be unmindful that those who are weak, and may expect support, must, in their turn, be ready to afford it.

We are called upon to execute an important trust to examine the principles of the Constitution now before you, and, in the name of the people, to receive or reject it.

I have no doubt we shall do this with attention and harmony; and flatter myself that, at the conclusion of our discussion, we shall find that it is not only expedient, but safe and honorable, to adopt it.

Jonathan Elliot, ed., *The Debates in the Several State Conventions, on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, Vol. 4, Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott and Company, pp. 318-332.