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Honestus

Boston *Independent Chronicle*, 30 October 1788¹

Mess’rs. ADAMS & NOURSE, I have observed in some late publications a disposition to inculcate among the people, an idea, *that those persons who are in favour of the proposed amendments, are not to be trusted in our federal government*; and some have gone even so far as to brand all such persons with the approbrious epithet of *antifederalists*. This being the case, I conceive it has now become a serious question to be determined—*Whether the amendments were proposed with an intention of having them adopted, or whether they were artfully introduced to deceive the Members of the Convention?* We cannot in candour suppose, that any Members of that respectable Body, (particularly the gentleman [John Hancock] who introduced them) meant to betray their constituents, by pretending to adopt a Constitution under the mask of amendments, and then desert them after its ratification: We cannot in justice to those respectable characters, who composed that august Assembly, conceive that so much cunning and subtilty should prevail among any individuals; neither ought we to presume, that men possessing so much political wisdom, would have been so *impolitic*, as to introduce the new government, by deceiving the people in its first establishment. Such a mode of conduct, they must be sensible, would have a tendency to raise a jealousy in the minds of the public, which would ever operate as a clog on all the future operations of government. No policy can be more destructive, than to raise a distrust of the *integrity* of those with whom we have intrusted our political concerns. What must be the sentiments of the people with respect to the Convention, if we are now told, *that the amendments are not to be regarded*—and that they were only introduced as a measure to pass the Constitution; and that our Members for the federal government, should be of that class of men, who are *openly opposed* to any amendments whatever.—Provided this is the case, (but which I conceive was far from the intention of the Convention) would not a distrust naturally prevail among the body of the people? What must be their conjectures? Will they think more favourably of that government, which needs such deception for its adoption? What decisions can they trust to in future, if this solemn form of ratification, signed by a man in whom they have ever confided, is to be treated as words of no signification? If the determinations of a body of men, consisting of characters as respectable for their wisdom and patriotism as any in the Commonwealth, are to be considered only as the mere trick of State policy, how will the people be ever able to ascertain the reality of any doings hereafter, however solemnly and deliberately resolved? Surely then if we mean to act consistent with the principles of *common prudence*, or wish to effect a lasting and beneficial government, founded on the CONFIDENCE OF THE PEOPLE, we ought at least to avoid those persons whom we have

reason to believe are opposed to the proposed amendments. As the Convention have pledged to the people, that exertions shall be made to effect the adoption of the propositions, we should be careful to have such Members as are disposed to comply with these resolutions; that if the amendments are of any importance they may be adopted; if not, that they may be set aside, after that decent investigation which is due to the propositions of this Commonwealth.

If we attend to the words of the recommen[da]tion, we cannot but consider them of some importance,—“*And the Convention do in the name, and in behalf of the people of this Commonwealth, enjoin it upon their Representatives in Congress, at all times, until the alterations and provisions aforesaid, have been considered, agreeably to the 5th article of the said Constitution; to exert all their influence, and use every reasonable and legal method to obtain a ratification of the said alterations and provisions, in such manner as is provided in the said article.*”

After reading the form of the ratification, it is the highest reflection on their probity, to doubt of the sentiments of the Convention, with respect to the *importance* of the amendments. How abusive and uncandid then to stigmatize those who are for adhering to them, as antifederalists? Certainly those who are opposed to them, may with greater propriety be stiled such, as they are opposed to the decided voice of the Convention. If we are to *enjoin* upon our Representatives the alterations and provisions mentioned—and they are *bound to exert* all their influence for these purposes—how absurd to think of chusing men, whom we have reason to suppose will rather use their influence to backward² any attempts for their adoption? Real federal men are those who are for the propositions submitted; for REAL FEDERALISM *consists in promoting the harmony and union of all the States*: These happy consequences are most likely to be effected by complying with the decisions of the several States, as far as their proposals can be adopted. But to disregard the several propositions, and pretend to chuse men professedly with a view to backward any attempt to gratify the people, must have a direct tendency to destroy that UNION, which must ever be our national support.

Besides, what dependence can we place in men, who arrogantly presume to disregard the almost unanimous voice of the Conventions of the several States!

To ascertain the real sentiments of some respectable gentlemen of the convention, let us attend to a few extracts from the debates.

Judge [Increase] Sumner said “He sincerely hoped that the propositions would meet with the approbation of the convention, as it appeared to him to remedy all the difficulties, which gentlemen in the course of the debates had mentioned; and concluded by observing, that the probability was very great, that if the amendments proposed were recommended *that they would be adopted by the general government.*” Judge [Francis] Dana and several other gentlemen spoke in favour of the amendments, and the probability of their being adopted—Doctor [Charles] Jarvis said “That the propositions are general, and not local; and that they were not calculated for the peculiar situation of this State; but with indiscriminate justice comprehended the circumstances of every individual on the banks of the Savannah, as well as the hardy and industrious husbandman on the margin of the Kennebeck, and if they were not ingrafted on the Constitution, *it would be our own faults.*”³

From the above quotations, we can judge of the sentiments of some of the gentlemen in the convention; How greatly arrogant then, it is for writers to abuse those who are in favour of the amendments, after such explicit declarations from gentlemen whose sincerity cannot be doubted.

I am sensible it is rather unfashionable among some circles, to adhere to our old republican principles.—A republican and an antifederalist with them are synonymous.—The term antifederalist has of late been used by such persons to weaken the influence of some of our old tried republicans. But however lightly they may esteem our staunch patriots, or however contemptible our republican principles may appear to *them*, yet the body of this people I doubt not are convinced that those are the *men* who will work out our deliverance, and those are the *principles* which must eventually secure the rights and liberties of those States.—This country was founded on those principles; actuated by them our fore-fathers, secured to themselves and posterity the privileges of freemen against the arbitrary attempts of their enemies.—Animated by the same sentiments, we opposed Britain; defeated their armies; and finally established our Independence.—Surely then at this period, when we are just about to reap the fruits of our perseverance, we will not relinquish those principles which have been our support, from the first settlement of this country to the present day? neither will we stigmatize our firm, and *aged patriots*, who have helped us in every time of danger.

Let us then while we are anxious to secure a permanent federal government, continue steadfast in our *first principles*.—Let us preserve the spirit of moderation, and carefully avoid the dangerous extremes of *licentiousness* and *inattention*.—On our own prudence and wisdom under God depend the Salvation of our country.—The proceedings of the first Congress will give the leading traits of our future national character; therefore as we regard the happiness of America, let us give our suffrages for those tried patriots, who early stood forth in the cause of their country. We may then be assured that while we act thus, we act safely.

The objects of our federal government, are not to gratify the vanity of the ambitious, or to provide maintenance for seekers, but to restore our national vigour, and to promote our agriculture manufactures and commerce; the *latter* therefore depending so materially on the union of the southern and northern States, and the propositions of Virginia and Carolina being so similar with this, we ought particularly to inculcate that harmony which may produce those mutual advantages, so earnestly wish'd for by every sincere friend to the prosperity, and lasting happiness of America.

To accomplish the important purposes of our government, we need those faithful servants of the public, whose zealous patriotism and *stern integrity*, early rendered them objects of British vengeance; likewise those whose knowledge in European politicks, has rendered them competent to defeat the most subtile measures of our enemies. Thus doubly secured by the goodness of our Constitution, and the virtues of our Legislators, America, under the smiles of Providence, “shall enjoy without further interruption, that WEIGHT and CONSIDERATION, due to its EXTENT, its POPULATION, and the CHARACTER of its INHABITANTS.”

1. “Honestus” was a pseudonym used by Benjamin Austin, Jr., in a series of essays that appeared in the *Independent Chronicle* in the spring of 1786. The style of those essays is similar to the one printed here, and it is probable that Austin was the author.

2. Obsolete: “To put or keep back, delay, retard” (OED).

3. The quotations are from the 1 February speech of Increase Sumner and the 4 February speech of Charles Jarvis. The reference is probably to the 1 February speech of Francis Dana.