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The Writings of Laco Boston, 1789 (excerpts)

Between 18 February and 25 March 1789, nine essays signed “Laco” were published in the *Massachusetts Centinel*. “Laco” was Boston merchant Stephen Higginson. As an arch conservative and elitist, Higginson was a bitter political enemy of John Hancock and these essays were in large measure designed to prevent Hancock’s reelection as governor. Higginson was particularly disturbed by Governor Hancock’s leniency toward Shaysites and for Hancock’s refusal to appoint Higginson’s good friend, Lieutenant Governor Benjamin Lincoln, to the profitable post of governor of Castle Island in Boston Harbor, a sinecure long held by lieutenant governors.

These excerpts are concerned mostly with Hancock’s role in the Massachusetts Convention and with his motivation, when, on 31 January, he proposed recommendatory amendments to the Constitution.

NUMBER VII.

. . . And the course of his [i.e., John Hancock’s] conduct from his reassuming the [governor’s] chair, to the meeting of our State Convention, for considering and adopting the new form of government for the Union, was nothing more than a renewed exhibition of the same levities, and a uniform preference of his own private interest, to that of the public.

A scene now opens upon us, very interesting and important:—The objects which then presented for our consideration, were so novel, and of such magnitude, as deservedly engrossed the feelings and the attention of every man. No one could remain mute and indifferent, while the question as to the New Constitution was pending; and every one, who felt no other bias than a regard to the safety and happiness of our country must necessarily create, was most anxiously solicitous for its adoption. But the popular demagogues, and those were very much embarrassed in their affairs, united to oppose it with all their might; and they laboured incessantly, night and day, to alarm the simple and credulous, by insinuating, that, however specious its appearance, and that of its advocates, tyranny and vassalage would result from its principles. The former of those descriptions were conscious, that a stable and efficient government, would deprive them of all future importance, or support from the publick; and the latter of them knew, that nothing but weakness and convulsions in government could screen them from payment of their debts. How far Mr. H. was influenced by either, or both of those motives, it is not easy to determine; but no one, who recollects his general habits, who knows his situation and views, and was ac-

quainted with the open conversation and conduct of his cabinet counsellors, can have a doubt of his being opposed to it. We all know, that Mr. Quondam, and Mr. Changeling, as well as the *once venerable old Patriot* [James Sullivan, Dr. Charles Jarvis, and Samuel Adams, respectively] who, by a notable defection, has lately thrown himself into the arms of Mr. H. in violation of every principle; and for the paltry privilege of sharing in his smiles, has, at the eve of life, cast an indelible stain over his former reputation—it is well known, I say, that these men do not dare to speak in publick, a language opposite to that of their patron; and it is equally notorious, that they were open in their opposition to the Constitution—They even went so far as to vilify its compilers, that they might thence draw an argument to support their suggestions, of its containing the seeds of latent tyranny and oppression. They endeavoured by every possible mean in their power, to create a popular clamour against the Constitution; but they failed in their attempt; and Mr. H. and his friends were obliged, upon their own principles, to grow more cautious in their opposition. The good sense of the *Mechanicks of Boston*, had produced some manly and spirited resolutions,¹ which effectually checked Mr. H. and his followers in their opposition to the Constitution; and eventually occasioned *four* votes in its favour, which otherwise would have been most certainly against it. Had those resolutions not made their appearance, Mr. H. and three others of our Delegates would have been in the negative;² but it was thought necessary by them, after they had appeared, to vote in favour of it. Having settled this point, the next thing was to do it with a good grace, and to profit as much by it as they could; and Mr. H. accordingly intimated to the advocates for the adoption, that he would appear in its favour, if they would make it worth his while. This intimation was given through a common friend, who assured the friends of the Constitution, that nothing more would be required on the part of Mr. H. than a promise to support him in the chair at the next election. This promise, though a bitter pill, was agreed to be given; for such was the state of things, that they were very much afraid to decide upon the question, whilst he was opposed to it. The famous conciliatory proposition of Mr. H. as it was called, was then prepared by the advocates, and adopted by him; but the truth is, he never was consulted about it, nor knew its contents, before it was handed to him to bring forward in Convention. At the appointed time, Mr. H. with all the parade of an Arbiter of States, came out with the motion, not only in the words, but the very original paper that was given him; and, with a confidence astonishing to all who were in the secret, he called it his own, and said it was the result of his own reflections on the subject, in the short intervals of ease which he had enjoyed, during a most painful disorder. In this pompous and farcical manner did he make that famous proposition, upon which he and his adherents have arrogated so much; but neither he nor they have any other merit in the case, than an attempt to deceive both parties, can fairly entitle them. For, at the very time he was buoying up the hopes of the advocates, he was assuring the opposers of the Constitution, by his emissaries, that he was really averse to it; and upon the strictest scrutiny we cannot find, that any one vote was gained by his being ostensibly in favour of it. The votes of the Old Patriot, and Mr. Changeling, and Mr. Joyce, jun. [John Winthrop, Jr.] we know were determined in its favour, by the resolutions of the *Mechanicks*; but the votes of many others, who used implicitly to follow Mr. H. were in the negative, which were counted upon by the friends of the Constitution, as being certain on their side. This is a strong confirmation that Mr. H. was then playing a game, which these people well understood; and indeed they, some of them, explicitly declared it at the time. His subsequent conduct, in regard to amendments, is a

clear proof also, that by appearing in its favour in Convention, he did not mean to support it; and that he was not serious when he declared his proposition to be only conciliatory, and not to remedy any defects existing in his mind in the constitution as reported, which he explicitly declared at the time was the case.

I feel a reluctance at exposing to the world this transaction, on various accounts; but when a man demands of us so much homage, and assumes to himself so much merit, for an action, which, when rightly understood, must certainly render him very contemptible, I think the publick should know how far they are indebted to him in the instance referred to. Has Mr. H. proved himself *open* and *undisguised* in this instance, as he assured the Court in his message?³ Let him have the credit of it.—But if he has been guilty of repeated duplicity—if he has endeavoured to deceive both parties for his own private advantage, may he then meet the disapprobation he deserves.

NUMBER VII. [i.e., VIII]

. . . But of all the instances of indulging to a foolish vanity, and an undue passion for flattery and ostentation, those which Mr. H. has often exhibited, have been the most excessive; and particularly the one which I mentioned in my last number, I mean his celebrated proposition in our State convention. Who, that had not lost all sense of decency and modesty, could have so publicly declared, what many who heard him could not believe? Who, that had not blunted his feelings, by gratefully receiving the most servile flattery, would have arrogated the merit of an action, or proposition, which many who heard him, knew to be the projection of another.

But that opportunity of increasing his borrowed reputation was too inviting to be omitted; and the feather then offered him was of so enchanting a hue, that he could not resist the desire of wearing it; though he might have known from the circumstances of the case, that it would soon fall from his crest. So entirely enslaved is he, by his vanity and caprice, that he, in the instance referred to, for the purpose of extending his popularity and securing his post, appeared to be in favour of the constitution, in direct opposition to his own most deliberate resolutions, and against the most earnest remonstrances of the old Patriot, Mr. Quondam, and Mr. Changeling. For though two of them voted for it, to please their constituents, it was generally known, that they were secretly opposed to it, and privately assisted those members, who were openly against it. We cannot soon forget the old Patriot's attempt to loose the question, by an insidious motion by way of amendment;⁴ nor the celebrated speech of a conceited eastern opposer, which was said to have been seen in the writing of Mr. Changeling. Nor can we believe, that the open opposition of Mr. Quondam would have been so conspicuous, or the secret attempts of the two others, to defeat the views of their patron, have been pursued, had his support to the question been more than ostensible—their uniform absolute devotedness to his will, renders it incredible. . . .

1. The tradesmen of Boston met on 7 January, two days before the meeting of the Massachusetts Convention, and adopted several resolutions strongly supporting the Constitution. It was believed that the tradesmen took such action to pressure Samuel Adams, among others, into supporting the Constitution.

2. These “four votes” in favor of the Constitution were cast by Samuel Adams, John Hancock, Charles Jarvis, and John Winthrop, Jr., all of whom had had reservations about the Constitution or who had been perceived as being its opponents.

3. The reference is to Governor Hancock's address of 27 February opening a new session of the Massachusetts General Court.

4. The reference is to Samuel Adams's motion on 5 February calling for additional recommendatory amendments that Adams himself withdrew because they alarmed both Federalists and antifederalists. Some antifederalists, however, renewed the motion which was put to a vote and defeated.

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