

Under the Democratic leadership of four-time governor, Al Smith, and his successor, Franklin Roosevelt, New York had become one of the most progressive (or liberal) states in the country. Roosevelt was serving his second two-year term as governor of New York when he ran for the presidency in 1932.

By the fall of 1932, the United States was fast approaching the nadir of what would be a decade-long depression. While Roosevelt called upon the federal government to act directly to relieve the unemployed, he also believed that dealing with the immediate crisis was not enough, and that the government needed to address the issue of poverty in a more permanent way. On October 2, 1932, about a month before the presidential election, Roosevelt gave a campaign speech in Detroit, Michigan, where he talked at length about "The Philosophy of Social Justice through Social Action."

"Social Justice through Social Action"

("The Philosophy of Social Justice through Social Action." Campaign Address at Detroit, Mich., October 2, 1932. Source: *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Volume One: The Genesis of the New Deal, Random House, 1938, pages 771-780.)

You know today is Sunday, and I am afraid that some of you people today in Detroit have been talking politics. Well, I am not going to. I want to talk to you about Government. That is a very different thing. And I am not going to refer to parties at all.

I am going to refer to some of the fundamentals that antedate parties, and antedate republics and empires, fundamentals that are as old as mankind itself. They are fundamentals that have been expressed in philosophies, for I don't know how many thousands of years, in every part of the world. Today, in our boasted modern civilization, we are facing just exactly the same problem, just exactly the same conflict between two schools of philosophy that they faced in the earliest days of America, and indeed of the world. One of them—one of these old philosophies—is the philosophy of those who would "let things alone." The other is the philosophy that strives for something new—something that the human race has never attained yet, but something which I believe the human race can and will attain—social justice, through social action.

From the days of the cave man to the days of the automobile, the philosophy of "letting things alone" has resulted in the jungle law of the survival of the so-called fittest. The philosophy of social action results in the protection of humanity and the fitting of as many human beings as possible into the scheme of surviving. I am sorry to say that among the followers of that first philosophy of "letting things alone" are a lot of people in my community back home, which is a little village, and in the farming districts of the Nation and in the great cities, such as yours. We can place in that philosophy a great many splendid people who keep saying, not only to themselves and to their friends, but to the community as a whole, "Why shouldn't we 'let things alone'?" In the first place they are not as bad as they are painted, and in the second place they will cure themselves. Time is a great healer." An easy philosophy! The kind of philosophy, my friends, that was expressed the other day by a Cabinet officer of the United States of America, when he is reported to have said, "Our children are apt to profit rather than suffer from what is going on."

While he was saying that, another branch of our Government, the United States Public Health Service, which believes in my kind of philosophy, I think, said this: "Over six millions of our public school children do not have enough to eat. Many of them are fainting at their desks. They are a prey to disease. Their future health is menaced."

In which school do you believe?

In the same way, there are two theories of prosperity and of well-being: The first theory is that if we make the rich richer, somehow they will let a part of their prosperity trickle down to the rest of us. The second theory—and I suppose this goes back to the days of Noah—I won't say Adam and Eve, because they had a less complicated situation—but, at least, back in the days of the flood, there was the theory that if we make the average of mankind comfortable and secure, their prosperity will rise upward, just as yeast rises up, through the ranks.

Now, my friends, the philosophy of social justice that I am going to talk about this Sabbath day, the philosophy of social justice through social action, calls definitely, plainly, for the reduction of poverty. And what do we mean when we talk about the reduction of poverty? We mean the reduction of the causes of poverty. When we have an epidemic of disease in these modern days, what do we do? We turn in the first instance to find out the sources from which the disease has come; and when we have found those sources, those causes, we turn the energy of our attack upon them.

We have got beyond the point in modern civilization of merely trying to fight an epidemic of disease by taking care of the victims after they are stricken. We do that; but we do more. We seek to prevent it; and the attack on poverty is not very unlike the attack on disease. We are seeking the causes and when we have found them, we must turn our attack upon them. What are the causes that destroy human beings, driving millions of them to destruction? Well, there are a good many of them, and there are a good many of us who are alive today who have seen tremendous steps taken toward the eradication of those causes.

Take, for instance, ill health: You and I know what has been accomplished by community effort, State effort, and the efforts and association of individual men and women toward the bettering of the health of humanity.

We have spent vast sums upon research. We have established a wholly new science, the science of public health; and we are carrying what we call today "instruction in health" into the most remote corners of our cities and our country districts. Apart from the humanitarian aspect, the result has been an economic saving. It has been money which has been returned to the community a thousand times over. You and I know that a sick person—a man, woman or child, who has to be taken care of—not only takes the individual who is sick out of active participation and useful citizenship, but takes somebody else, too. And so, from the purely dollars and cents point of view that we Americans are so fond of thinking about, public health has paid for itself.

And what have we done along other lines for the prevention of some of the causes of poverty?

I go back twenty-two years to a time when, in my State of New York, we tried to pass in the Legislature what we called a Workmen's Compensation Act, knowing, as we did, that there were thousands of men and women who every year were seriously injured in industrial accidents of one kind or another, who became a burden on their community, who were unable to work, unable to get adequate medical care. A lot of us youngsters in the Legislature in those days were called radicals. We were called Socialists. They did not know the word Bolshevik in those days, but if they had known that, we would have been called that, too. We put through a Workmen's Compensation Act. The courts, thinking in terms of the Seventeenth Century, as some courts do, declared it to be unconstitutional. So we had to go about amending the Constitution, and the following year we got a Workmen's Compensation Act.

What has it done? We were not the first State to have it. One of the earliest States, by the way, was New Jersey, which, the year before the action in the State of New York, passed a Workmen's Compensation Act at the bidding of that great humanitarian Governor, Woodrow Wilson. The result has been that almost every State of the Union has eliminated that cause of poverty among the masses of the people.

Take another form of poverty in the old days. Not so long ago, there were in every part of the Nation—in country districts and in city districts hundreds and thousands of crippled children who could get no adequate care, who were lost to the community and who were a burden on the community. We have, in these past twenty or thirty years, gradually provided means for restoring crippled children to useful citizenship; and it has all been a factor in going after and solving one of the causes of poverty and disease.

And then in these later years, we have been wondering about old people; and we have come to the conclusion in this modern civilization that the old-fashioned theory of carting old people off to the county poorhouse is not the best thing after all.

I shall tell you what sold me on old age insurance—old age pensions. Not so long ago—about ten years—I received a great shock. I had been away from my hometown of Hyde Park during the wintertime and when I came back I found that a tragedy had occurred. I had had an old farm neighbor, who had been a splendid old fellow—Supervisor of his town, Highway Commissioner of his town, one of the best of our citizens. Before I had left, around Christmas time, I had seen the old man, who was eighty-nine, his old brother, who was eighty-seven, his other brother, who was eighty-five, and his "kid" sister, who was eighty-three.

They were living on a farm; I knew it was mortgaged to the hilt; but I assumed that everything was all right, for they still had a couple of cows and a few chickens. But when I came back in the spring, I found that in the severe winter that followed there had been a heavy fall of snow, and one of the old brothers had fallen down on his way out to the barn to milk the cow, and had perished in the snowdrift. The town authorities had come along

and had taken the two old men and had put them into the county poorhouse, and they had taken the old lady and had sent her down, for want of a better place, to the insane asylum, although she was not insane but just old.

That sold me on the idea of trying to keep homes intact for old people.

In another respect modern science has been good to us. It is not so very long ago that a young person, or an old person, who had any trouble with his mentality, was put into what was called an asylum and not long before that they used to call it a "madhouse." Even when I was a boy, the States of the Nation used to provide asylums. And when anybody was not entirely right mentally—when anyone was a mental defective as we would say today he used to be carted off to the asylum to stay there until he came out to go to the graveyard.

Today that is no longer true. Medical science is now doing two things: first, for the young people who are not mentally deficient but who require special mental training we are applying special treatment and special education so that, instead of becoming a burden when they grow up, they are going to be useful citizens.

And then, on the other side of it, there is the special treatment for the older people, who do have to go to hospitals for mental troubles. The other day, just before I left Albany, I got a report from my State Department of Mental Hygiene showing that instead of the old-fashioned system in which the rule was observed of "once in, always in," this past year in the State of New York we had sent back to their families 23 percent of all those who were in our hospitals for mental cases—cured.

Now, those are some of the causes that have destroyed in past ages countless thousands of our fellow human beings. They are the causes that we must attack if we are to make the future safer for humanity. We can go on taking care of the handicapped and the crippled and the sick and the feeble-minded and the unemployed; but common sense and humanity call on us to turn our back definitely on these destroyers. Poverty resulting from these destroyers is largely preventable, but, my friends, if poverty is to be prevented, we require a broad program of social justice.

We cannot go back to the old prisons, for example, to the old systems of mere punishment under which a man out of prison was not fitted to live in our community alongside of us. We cannot go back to the old system of asylums. We cannot go back to the old lack of hospitals, the lack of public health. We cannot go back to the sweatshops of America. We cannot go back to children working in factories. Those days are gone.

There are a lot of new steps to take. It is not a question of just not going back. It is a question also of not standing still.

For instance, the problem of unemployment in the long run—and I am not talking about the emergency of this year—can be and shall be solved by the human race. Some leaders have wisely declared for a system of unemployment insurance throughout this broad land of ours; and we are going to come to it.

But I do not believe the Secretary of the Interior would be for it. He would say that great good is coming to this country because of the present situation. Yes, the followers of the philosophy of "let alone" have been decrying all of these measures of social welfare. What do they call them? They call them "paternalistic." All right, if they are paternalistic, I am a father.

They maintain that these laws interfere with individualism, forgetful of the fact that the causes of poverty in the main are beyond the control of any one individual or any czar, either a czar of politics or a czar of industry. The followers of the philosophy of "social action for the prevention of poverty" maintain that if we set up a system of justice we shall have small need for the exercise of mere philanthropy. Justice, after all, is the first goal we seek. We believe that when justice has been done individualism will have a greater security to devote the best that individualism itself can give. In other words, my friends, our long-range objective is not a dole, but a job.

At the same time, we have throughout this Nation and I know you have in Detroit, because Frank Murphy has talked to me of it many times in the past year or two—widespread suffering which all of us in the city and country alike have to do everything we can to tide over. All agree that, the first responsibility for the alleviation of poverty and distress and for the care of the victims of the depression rests upon the locality—its individuals, organizations and Government. It rests, first of all, perhaps, upon the private agencies of philanthropy, secondly, other social organizations, and last, but not least, the Church. Yet all agree that to leave to the locality the entire responsibility would result in placing the heaviest burden in most cases upon those who are the least able to bear it. In other words, the communities that have the most difficult problem, like Detroit, would be the communities that would have to bear the heaviest of the burdens.

And so the State should step in to equalize the burden by providing for a large portion of the care of the victims of poverty and by providing assistance and guidance for local communities.

Above and beyond that duty of the States the national Government has a responsibility.

I would like to enlarge on that a lot, but that would be politics, and I cannot. My friends, the ideal of social justice of which I have spoken—an ideal that years ago might have been thought over-advanced—is now accepted by the moral leadership of all of the great religious groups of the country. Radical? Yes, and I shall show you how radical it is. I am going to cite three examples of what the churches say, the radical churches of America—Protestant, Catholic and Jewish.

And first I will read to you from the Sunday Sermon, the Labor Sermon sent out this year by the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, representing a very large proportion of the Protestants in our country.

Hear how radical they are: They say:

"The thing that matters in any industrial system is what it does actually to human beings...

"It is not denied that many persons of wealth are rendering great service to society. It is only suggested that the wealthy are overpaid in sharp contrast with the underpaid masses of the people. The concentration of wealth carries with it a dangerous concentration of power. It leads to conflict and violence. To suppress the symptoms of this inherent conflict while leaving the fundamental causes of it untouched is neither sound statesmanship nor Christian goodwill.

"It is becoming more and more clear that the principles of our religion and the findings of social sciences point in the same direction. Economists now call attention to the fact that the present distribution of wealth and income, which is so unbrotherly in the light of Christian ethics, is also unscientific in that it does not furnish purchasing power to the masses to balance consumption and production in our machine age."

And now I am going to read you another great declaration and I wonder how many people will call it radical. It is just as radical as I am. It is a declaration from one of the greatest forces of conservatism in the world, the Catholic Church. I quote, my friends, from the scholarly encyclical issued last year by the Pope, one of the greatest documents of modern times:

"It is patent in our days that not alone is wealth accumulated, but immense power and despotic economic domination are concentrated in the hands of a few, and that those few are frequently not the owners but only the trustees and directors of invested funds which they administer at their good pleasure...

"This accumulation of power, the characteristic note of the modern economic order, is a natural result of limitless free competition, which permits the survival of those only who are the strongest, which often means those who fight most relentlessly, who pay least heed to the dictates of conscience.

"This concentration of power has led to a three-fold struggle for domination: First, there is the struggle for dictatorship in the economic sphere itself; then the fierce battle to acquire control of the Government, so that its resources and authority may be abused in the economic struggle, and, finally, the clash between the Governments themselves."

And finally, I would read to you from another great statement, a statement from Rabbi Edward L. Israel, Chairman of the Social Justice Commission of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Here is what he says:

"We talk of the stabilization of business. What we need is the stabilization of human justice and happiness and the permanent employment of economic policies which will enable us to preserve the essential human values of life amid all the changing aspects of the economic order. We must have a revamping of the entire method of approach to these problems of the economic order. We need a new type of social conscience that will give us courage to

act...

"We so easily forget. Once the cry of so-called prosperity is heard in the land, we all become so stampeded by the spirit of the god Mammon, that we cannot serve the dictates of social conscience... We are here to serve notice that the economic order is the invention of man; and that it cannot dominate certain eternal principles of justice and of God."

And so, my friends, I feel a little as if I had been preaching a sermon. I feel a little as if I had been talking too much of some of the fundamentals, and yet those fundamentals enter into your life and my life every day. More, perhaps, than we can realize. If we realized that far more, it would result throughout this country in a greater activity, a greater interest on the part of the individual men and women who make up our Nation, in some of the problems which cannot be solved in the long run without the help of everybody.

We need leadership, of course. We need leadership of people who are honest in their thinking and honest in their doing. We need leadership, if it is straight thinking and unselfish; but in the last analysis we must have the help of the men and women all the way from the top to the bottom, especially of the men and women who believe in the school of philosophy which is not content to leave things as they are.

And so, in these days of difficulty, we Americans everywhere must and shall choose the path of social justice—the only path that will lead us to a permanent bettering of our civilization, the path that our children must tread and their children must tread, the path of faith, the path of hope and the path of love toward our fellow man.