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Democracy and Government Service

A remarkable speech was delivered by A. Lawrence Lowell, President of Harvard University, at Boston on December 11th, in connection with the annual conference of the National Civil Service Reform League. The utterance is so notable that the greater portion of it is hereunder reproduced:—

We have lived into a time when not those people alone, but the great masses of our population, are questioning whether representative democracy has, on the whole, been as much of a success as had been supposed that it would be. We are told, indeed, that some other formula, as yet untried, or not enough tried to know from experience what its results will be, will solve all the difficulties which we find in the old representative form of government.

As we look back over the history of the world we see that democracies everywhere have been a failure until these latest times. Until 100 years ago democracy all over the world appeared to be brilliant but short-lived. The democracy of Greece produced a greater flow of intellect than was ever produced in any body of men in any nation of its size, but it came to a rapid end. The democracy of Rome did more in civilizing the known world than any other body of men has ever done, but it came to an end, and it was overthrown.

I think, if we ask the reason why Greece and Rome were overthrown, we shall find the reason to be one which it would be ostentation to give anywhere else, but in this League we can say that it was because of the absence of civil service reform. By which I mean to say it was owing to the fact that their officials were all temporary officials, selected by popular vote for short periods, and that

they had no permanent civil service whatever in those countries.

Greece suffered defeat, and its government was destroyed. Rome came into conflict with no great exterior force, but she broke down of her own weight because amateur officials, changed every year, were incapable of ruling an empire. The result was that that system broke down, and the civilization of Rome was preserved for later times by the incoming of an emperor, whose chief work, perhaps, was the establishment of a system of permanent expert officials, built up, of course, not at once, but very gradually, and, curiously enough, to some extent inspired by the experience of Egypt.

Now, if Rome could learn something about civil service reform from Egypt, it is not wholly impossible that we may learn it from places a little less dark. We are in the habit of copying things, and only copying the exterior. There is said to be in Africa a tribe of monkeys who are extremely imitative. They build houses exactly resembling those of the natives, and then they live on the outside of them instead of inside. I have always felt that the imitator of political institutions was a little bit inclined to live on the outside of the institution when it had been copied.

I have seen many examples of this. One of them is the copying of the civil service principle from England. England is the country of modern