

Executive Speech
of
Ezra Butler
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SPEECH OF GOV. BUTLER— 1826¹.

Gentlemen of the Council and Gentlemen of the House of Representatives:—The recent election, made by the enlightened freemen of Vermont, has laid me under obligations deeply affecting, and called me to the performance of duties that ought to excite and bring into action all the powers I possess, for the promotion of the public good. The approbation of my fellow citizens of my past services in subordinate stations, in which they have heretofore placed me, implied by their suffrages in the present election—a favor I have never sought, never expected, but has been freely given—I view as the greatest reward in their power to bestow. It is received with the deepest gratitude. As to the future, the same honest intentions that have marked the past, will direct my conduct. I should, however, shrink from the trust assumed, but for reliance on that kind, overruling Providence, from whom I have so often found support, and upon your good will, indulgence and co-operation. With the hope of these, I engage in the work before me.

Those who are the best acquainted with my past conduct will expect a frank disclosure of my own views on every occasion when duty requires it. In making a few remarks, not so directly connected with the ordinary duties of legislation, but of no less vital interest to the community, apology may be thought necessary; and the only one I can make, is the ardent desire felt for the future prosperity of our country. However conscious I might have been, that my talents were capable of doing but little good or hurt, opportunities for both have not been wanting. Ever since the adoption of our constitution, with the exception of three or four years, I have constantly had a direct concern in the legislation of this state, or that of the general government. Neither was the freedom of our country obtained without my participating personally in her sufferings. Thirty years ago, fears were suggested that the great body of the people of this country would not at this time find themselves in possession of those political privileges which they now so richly enjoy. At that early period, I firmly resolved that my own conscience should never upbraid me with aiding the loss, if it must be sustained. To that resolution I have adhered; and with a view to perpetuate those privileges, is the object of these remarks.

Our country has struggled through trying scenes. They have all terminated in our political prosperity, and resulted in the stability and permanency of our institutions. At present we see her rapidly advancing to that high eminence of national importance to which she evidently is destined. The people in every part of the Union are in the full enjoyment of all that liberty which the honest can desire, both civil and religious; with the exception only of that unfortunate class of the human species, held in servitude in some of our sister states. But it is confidently hoped, that the time is not far distant when those states may deem it expedient, in accordance with the philanthropic feeling of benevolent individuals and societies, to join heartily in their complete emancipation, in such a way as shall be consistent with the safety and peace of community.

In no other part of the world are the principles of freedom so well understood or so fully enjoyed. We have just cause to consider ourselves the most favored of the human family; and nothing can or will stop the current of this favor, unless it is obstructed by our own vice and folly. Let the constitution of the United States be held sacred; let none of its fundamental principles be altered or undermined; let no amendment take place until its necessity is obviously shown by experience; let the government continue to be justly and wisely administered, and we may then expect the perpetuation of our national prosperity. If morality and piety continue to prevail, the elections by the people will make it manifest. The national legislature will be composed of men possessing integrity as well as wisdom; such legislators will never betray the trust reposed in them. As the same freemen also elect the members of the state governments, the same desirable result must follow as to the internal concerns of the respective states. It was integrity of heart and sound morality that guided our fathers in all their sagacious exertions to obtain for themselves and their descendants those peculiar privileges we now enjoy. Information is of much use, but will only produce its legitimate fruits when united with morality, and all who are engaged in its promotion, by their precepts and example, are affording constant aid to good government.

¹ From the printed *Assembly Journal* of 1826.

The general government has given the fullest proof of its ability and intention to protect our country from foreign aggression and while it continues that just and magnanimous course it has hitherto pursued, we have nothing to fear from abroad. In the executive of that government we have entire confidence, founded on the best proof that the same policy will be adhered to, during the present administration.

The numerous attempts lately made, to amend the constitution of the United States, will naturally call the attention of the state governments. A subject so deeply interesting to *all*, will not escape the jealous concern of *any*. Much might be apprehended from such proceedings, were less reliance placed on the national and state legislatures. So long as the great body of enlightened freemen are in the belief that they now enjoy all the liberty and security that human government can afford, we deem our country in no danger of those evils that would be the natural consequence of an ardent desire of change.

Permit me to add, that the people of this state have manifested as strong attachment to their *own* institutions as those of the United States. During thirty-three years, we have lived and prospered under our present constitution. Repeated attempts have been made by a small minority to amend or change that instrument, but, on every occasion, the powerful voice of an overwhelming majority hushed all to peace, – silenced all complaints. The short periods for which all our elections are made the easy and silent manner in which all are discharged from the public service, have been the means by which time common sense of a well-informed community has been carried into every department of the government. Our institutions, ejections, manner of legislating, customs and laws, are as strictly republican now as thirty years ago. We have greatly increased in numbers, in wealth, in the arts and sciences, and at the same time equality and friendly intercourse is maintained between all professions and classes of citizens in our state, beyond example. Submissions to the laws has been as uniform, – piety and morality as much encouraged, and find as sure protection here as in any section of the world. Whence, then, the desire of change and thirst for novelty? In depressed circumstances they are highly useful, but in a state of unexampled prosperity, if indulged, will prove ruinous. Community at large has a deep interest in every act of the legislature, and unborn millions may be affected by its decisions. In all the appointments you have to make, – in all the deliberations in which you engage, your own responsibility should steadily be kept in view.

While calling your attention to the immediate business of legislation before us, I am not sensible that any material alterations in the laws relating to any department of the government could be beneficially made at this time. It seems now to be well understood, that alterations should be made only in those cases pointed out by experience. When these are provided for, let us stop.

The manner in which the two houses have transacted the business of legislation as pointed out by the statutes on that subject, has given universal satisfaction to the people. They need no alteration to promote and cherish the good understanding which has heretofore existed; and the friendly feeling that so fully prevailed the last session is highly important to our constituents.

Religious liberty, so well understood and so fully possessed in this state and so firmly established by ancient laws, has produced many salutary effects. Laws so just in themselves, and so safe for all, could not fail to remove complaint and promote friendship between the different religious denominations in community, and peace among the people.

Our judiciary system has been often amended, altered and changed. The laws now in force are of recent date, — the people have not yet had sufficient time to form a correct opinion of their ultimate effect. Let the system remain undisturbed for the present, and in process of time, experience will mark the path of duty to be pursued by the legislature on this subject.

The laws regulating and governing the militia will claim your serious attention. They have been so lately revised and amended, that hopes are entertained that no alteration will be found necessary at present. Much reliance, however, must be placed on information yet to be received from different parts of the state, by gentlemen who have been actively employed in carrying those laws into effect.

Vermont has never been inattentive to the great interests of education. This appears in all the grants of land made, and in the numerous acts passed, having for their object the instruction of youth. The exertions made on this subject have proved salutary, in a high degree.

At present, the people in this state are as well informed as in any part of the Union. A matter of such importance will ever be kept in view by every wise legislature. The act of the last session, making provision for a permanent fund for the support of common schools, is highly commendable and if any means can be discovered by which its resources may be increased, the measure will meet the approbation of our constituents, and, in some future day, be highly applauded by their descendants.

Expenses of making and repairing highways are very great, and much importance attaches to our laws on the subject – the public at large are interested in the improvement of those in use, and that others should be made where they are needed. Laws should be such that all may view their duty and interest united. The act passed Nov. 3, 1810, directing the disposition of fines imposed on towns for not keeping their roads in repair, appears to be unwise. It has often been the ground of encouragement to neglect present duty by the inhabitants of some parts of a town, in the hope that a large fine might be imposed, the expenditure of which would be useful to themselves and expensive to others, who had been more industrious. Principles similar are contained in the act passed Nov. 2, 1821, but in the case provided for in this act, they appear unexceptionable.

If it should be thought inexpedient, still, to abolish imprisonment for debt, yet something may be done to render commitments less numerous. Was the creditor made liable for all those expenses now chargeable on the town, where the indigent debtor has settlement or happens to reside, commitments would be less frequent, and much cost saved that ought never to have been made. The justice and utility of the measure unite in recommending it to your consideration.

The appointments you have to make are numerous and important. The peace and prosperity of the state will in no small degree depend on the wisdom manifested in this branch of your duty. Integrity and ability united in the same person, are the highest recommend aliens for office, and should be kept in view, in every appointment. In addition to the ordinary appointments to be made, this session, a senator must be elected, to represent this state in the senate of the United States, for six years from and after the 3d of March next. Provision must also be made to carry into effect the 43d section of the constitution of this state, by an act, regulating the choice of a council of censors, and fixing the place of their first meeting.

For more than twenty years past, the legislature of this state has uniformly manifested its disapprobation of raising money by lotteries for any purpose whatever. Last session, large sums were offered for the privilege of selling tickets and drawing lotteries in this state; but every proposition of the kind was rejected and it is believed, the great body of our citizens are in sentiment opposed to raising money that way; indeed, the principles of morality in Vermont must suffer a sad decline, before this species of gambling will be sanctioned by the government, or approved by the people. The numerous sales of lottery tickets made within the last year has not been a little surprising to many and especially to those who had personal knowledge of all that took place at the last session. If the construction be correct, lately given to these grants anciently made by the state to raise money by lotteries, by those who are principally concerned, it is difficult to say, when the business will stop. I would suggest for your consideration, the propriety of appointing some suitable person to bring the whole subject before the proper authority and obtain a legal decision as to all the grants on which reliance is placed for support in this speculation. At the same time, protection may be afforded to many who are exposed to pecuniary penalties. This would accord with justice and sound policy.

Economy is of importance in all the concerns of private life; without it, no individual can long be prosperous or happy. It is as essential in the affairs of governments. It has marked the general course of former legislation in Vermont and it is presumed the present assembly will not be less frugal in the expenditure of the public treasure.

Experience has shown the propriety of confining legislation to its legitimate objects. Considerable expense to the public, and great inconvenience to individuals, have already been the result of indiscretion on this important subject.

All communications to me, from any source, proper for your consideration, will be seasonably laid before you.

To conclude, let us reflect on the past, and make a wise improvement of the experience we have had. This will assist us in our future progress, and teach us how to profit by our own mistakes. Let every one faithfully adhere to the dictates of his own conscience, and however great the diversity of opinion, individually expressed, may be, the result will be the united wisdom of the whole, – and all may hope for the blessing of Divine Providence on our exertions for the promotion of the public good.

I shall often go wrong through defect of judgment. I ask your indulgence for my errors, which will never be intentional; and your support in maintaining peace and good order in society – and I humbly beseech God our Saviour, whose we are, and whom we ought to serve, to bestow his blessings on our labors, our persons, and our constituents.

EZRA BUTLER.