

Republic or Democracy¹

When the United States declared independence from Great Britain in 1776, the former British colonies faced the task of creating new constitutional governments at the state and national levels. One of the most important figures in this process was John Adams, a lawyer from Massachusetts. Adams, first identified with the revolutionary cause when he wrote a series of resolutions condemning the Stamp Act in 1765, became a forceful advocate for independence while serving in the First and Second Continental Congresses. Like many other revolutionary leaders, however, he was distrustful of the radical forms of democracy [ultimate rule by directly by the people] advocated by *Common Sense* author Thomas Paine and others, believing that popular democracy carried its own threat of tyranny by the majority. Adams's views on government are spelled out in the first viewpoint provided here, taken from a pamphlet first published in 1776, entitled *Thoughts on Government, in a Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend*. The pamphlet was written in part to counter the influence of Paine and other democratic writers. Adams advocates a “mixed republican” government consisting of different branches that check the powers of one another, and through which he feels the rule of law and true liberty could be preserved. Adams put his views into practice in 1780 when he wrote most of the provisions of the Massachusetts state constitution. He later became the first Vice President and the second President of the United States following the creation of the Constitution.

By 1777 most of the former British colonies had created and adopted new state constitutions, reflecting the ideas of John Adams and other relatively conservative colonial leaders, included a bicameral legislature, the separation of powers, the election of the governor and state officials by the legislature, and property qualifications for voting. The major exception was the Pennsylvania constitution, adopted in September of 1776. Among

¹ From Leone, Bruno, William Dudley, and John C. Chalberg, eds. *Opposing Viewpoint in American History: Volume I: From Colonial Times to Reconstruction*. Greenhaven Press, Inc.: San Diego, CA, 1996.

its novel features was a unicameral legislature, an executive president and council elected directly by the public, and a broad franchise enabling all taxpayers and sons of taxpayers to vote. The Pennsylvania constitution was modeled after proposals set forth in several pamphlets and tracts published in 1776. Among these tracts was *The Interest of America*, excerpted here as the second viewpoint. The anonymous author writes that America has a chance to create an entirely new and more democratic form of government to best serve the interests of the people.

A Republican Form of Government is Best (1776)

John Adams (1735-1826)²

My dear Sir,

If I was equal to the task of forming a plan for the government of a colony, I should be flattered with your request, and very happy to comply with it; because as the divine science of politics is the science of social happiness, and the blessings of society depend entirely on the constitutions of government, which are generally institutions that last for many generations, there can be no employment more agreeable to a benevolent mind, than a research after the best.

[Alexander] Pope flattered tyrants too much when he said,

“For forms of government let fools contest,
That which is best administered is best.”

Nothing can be more fallacious than this: But poets read history to collect flowers not fruits—they attend to fanciful images, not the effects of social institutions. Nothing is more certain from the history of nations, and the nature of man, than that some forms of government are better fitted for being well administered than others.

² From *Thoughts on Government, in a Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend* by John Adams (Boston, 1776). Reprinted in *The Works of John Adams*, vol. 4, edited by Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little, Brown, 1854).

The Purpose of Government

We ought to consider, what is the end [purpose] of government, before we determine which is the best form. Upon this point all speculative politicians will agree, that the happiness of society is the end of government, as all Divines and moral Philosophers will agree that the happiness of the individual is the end of man. From this principle it will follow, that the form of government, which communicates ease, comfort, security, or in one word happiness to the greatest number of persons, and in the greatest degree, is the best.

All sober enquiries after truth, ancient and modern, Pagan and Christian, have declared that the happiness of man, as well as his dignity consists in virtue. Confucius, Zoroaster, Socrates, Mahomet, not to mention authorities really sacred, have agreed in this.

If there is a form of government then, whose principle and foundation is virtue, will not every sober man acknowledge it better calculated to promote the general happiness than any other form?

Fear is the foundation of most governments; but is so sordid and brutal a passion, and renders men, in whose breasts it predominates, so stupid, and miserable, that Americans will not be likely to approve of any political institution which is founded on it.

Honor is truly sacred, but holds a lower rank in the scale of moral excellence than virtue. Indeed the former is but a part of the latter, and consequently has not equal pretensions to support a frame of government productive of human happiness.

The foundation of every government is some principle or passion in the minds of the people. The noblest principles and most generous affections in our nature then, have the fairest chance to support the noblest and most generous models of government.

A man must be indifferent to the sneers of modern Englishmen to mention in their company the names of [Algernon] Sidney, [James] Harrington, [John] Locke, [John] Milton, [John] Nedham, [Henry] Neville, [Gilbert] Burnet, and [Benjamin] Hoadley. No small fortitude is necessary to confess that one has read them. The wretched condition of this country, however, for ten or fifteen years past, has frequently reminded me of their

principles and reasonings. They will convince any candid mind, that there is no good government but what is republican. That the only valuable part of the British constitution is so; because the very definition of a republic is “an Empire of Laws, and not of men.” That, as a republic is the best of governments, so that particular arrangement of the powers of society, or in other words that form of government, which is best contrived to secure an impartial and exact execution of the laws, is the best of republics.

Of republics, there is an inexhaustible variety, because the possible combinations of the powers of society are capable of innumerable variations.

As good government, is an empire of laws, how shall your laws be made? In a large society, inhabiting an extensive country, it is impossible that the whole should assemble, to make laws: The first necessary step then, is, to depute power from the many, to a few of the most wise and good. But by what rules shall you choose your Representatives? Agree upon the number and qualifications of persons, who shall have the benefit of choosing, or annex this privilege to the inhabitants of a certain extent of ground.

The principal difficulty lies, and the greatest care should be employed in constituting this Representative Assembly. It should be in miniature, an exact portrait of the people at large. It should think, feel, reason, and act like them. That it may be the interest of this Assembly to do strict justice at all times, it should be an equal representation, or, in other words equal interest among the people should have equal interest in it. Great care should be taken to effect this, and to prevent unfair, partial, and corrupt elections. Such regulations, however, may be better made in times of greater tranquility than the present, and they will spring up of themselves naturally, when all the powers of government come to be in the hands of the people's friends. At present it will be safest to proceed in all established modes to which the people have been familiarized by habit.

Disadvantage of One Assembly

A representation of the people in one assembly being obtained, a question arises whether all the powers of government, legislative, executive, and judicial, shall be left in this body? I

think a people cannot be long free, nor ever happy, whose government is in one Assembly. My reasons for this opinion are as follow:—

1. A single Assembly is liable to all the vices, follies and frailties of an individual. Subject to fits of humor, starts of passion, flights of enthusiasm, partialities of prejudice, and consequently productive of hasty results and absurd judgments: And all these errors ought to be corrected and defects supplied by some controlling power.
2. A single Assembly is apt to be avaricious, and in time will not scruple to exempt itself from burthens which it will lay, without compunction, on its constituents.
3. A single Assembly is apt to grow ambitious, and after a time will not hesitate to vote itself perpetual. This was one fault of the long parliament, but more remarkably of Holland, whose Assembly first voted themselves from annual to septennial, then for life, and after a course of years, that all vacancies happening by death, or otherwise, should be filled by themselves, without any application to constituents at all.
4. A Representative Assembly, although extremely well qualified, and absolutely necessary as a branch of the legislature, is unfit to exercise the executive power, for want of two essential properties, secrecy and dispatch.
5. A Representative Assembly is still less qualified for the judicial power; because it is too numerous, too slow, and too little skilled in the laws.
6. Because a single Assembly, possessed of all the powers of government, would make arbitrary laws for their own interest, execute all laws arbitrarily for their own interest, and adjudge all controversies in their own favor.

But shall the whole power of legislation rest in one Assembly? Most of the foregoing reasons apply equally to prove that the legislative power ought to be more complex—to which we may add, that if the legislative power is wholly in one Assembly, and the executive in another, or in a single person, these two powers will oppose and enervate upon each other, until the contest shall end in war, and the whole power, legislative and executive, be usurped by the strongest.

The judicial power, in such case, could not mediate, or hold the balance between the two contending powers, because the legislative would undermine it. And this shews the necessity too, of giving the executive power a negative upon the legislative, otherwise this will be continually encroaching upon that.

To avoid these dangers let a distant Assembly be constituted, as a mediator between the two extreme branches of the legislature, that which represents the people and that which is vested with the executive power.

Let the Representative Assembly then elect by ballot, from among themselves or their constituents, or both, a distinct Assembly, which for the sake of perspicuity we will call a Council. It may consist of any number you please, say twenty or thirty, and should have a free and independent exercise of its judgment, and consequently a negative voice in the legislature.

The Governor

These two bodies thus constituted, and made integral parts of the legislature, let them unite, and by joint ballot choose a Governor, who, after being stripped of most of those badges of domination called prerogatives, should have a free and independent exercise of his judgment, and be made also an integral part of the legislature. This I know is liable to objections, and if you please you may make him only President of the Council, as in Connecticut: But as the Governor is to be invested with the executive power, with consent of Council, I think he ought to have a negative upon the legislative. If he is annually elective, as he ought to be, he will always have so much reverence and affection for the People, their Representatives and Councilors, that although you give him an independent exercise of his judgment, he will seldom use it in opposition to the two Houses, except in cases the public utility of which would be conspicuous, and some such cases would happen.

In the present exigency of American affairs, when by an act of Parliament we are put out of the royal protection, and consequently discharged from our allegiance; and it has become necessary to assume government for our immediate security, the Governor, Lieutenant-Governor, Secretary, Treasurer,

Commissary, Attorney-General, should be chosen by joint Ballot, of both Houses. And these and all other elections, especially of Representatives, and Councilors, should be annual, there not being in the whole circle of the sciences, a maxim more infallible than this, "Where annual elections end, there slavery begins."

These great men, in this respect, should be, once a year

"Like bubbles on the sea of matter borne,
They rise, they break, and to that sea return."

This will teach them the great political virtues of humility, patience, and moderation, without which every man in power becomes a ravenous beast of prey.

This mode of constituting the great offices of state will answer very well for the present, but if, by experiment, it should be found inconvenient, the legislature may at its leisure devise other methods of creating them, by elections of the people at large, as in Connecticut, or it may enlarge the term for which they shall be chosen to seven years, or three years, or for life, or make any other alterations which the society shall find productive of its ease, its safety, its freedom, or in one word, its happiness.

A rotation of all offices, as well as of Representatives and Councilors, has many advocates, and is contended for with many plausible arguments. It would be attended no doubt with many advantages, and if the society has a sufficient number of suitable characters to supply the great number of vacancies which would be made by such a rotation, I can see no objection to it. These persons may be allowed to serve for three years, and then excluded three years, or for any longer or shorter term.

Any seven or nine of the legislative Council may be made a Quorum, for doing business as a Privy Council, to advise the Governor in the exercise of the executive branch of power, and in all acts of state.

The Governor should have the command of the militia, and of all your armies. The power of pardons should be with the Governor and Council.

Judges, Justices and all other officers, civil and military, should be nominated and appointed by the Governor, with the advice and consent of Council, unless you choose to have a

government more popular; if you do, all officers, civil and military, may be chosen by joint ballot of both Houses, or in order to preserve the independence and importance of each House, by ballot of one House, concurred by the other....

The Judicial Branch

The dignity and stability of government in all its branches, the morals of the people and every blessing of society, depends so much upon an upright and skillful administration of justice, that the judicial power ought to be distinct from both the legislative and executive, and independent upon both, that so it may be a check upon both, as both should be checks upon that. The Judges therefore should always be men of learning and experience in the laws, of exemplary morals, great patience, calmness, coolness and attention. Their minds should not be distracted with jarring interests; they should not be dependent upon any man or body of men. To these ends they should hold estates for life in their offices, or in other words their commissions should be during good behavior, and their salaries ascertained and established by law. For misbehavior the grand inquest of the Colony, the House of Representatives, should impeach them before the Governor and Council, where they should have time and opportunity to make their defense, but if convicted should be removed from their offices, and subjected to such other punishment as shall be thought proper....

Laws for the liberal education of youth, especially of the lower class of people, are so extremely wise and useful, that to a humane and generous mind, no expense for this purpose would be thought extravagant....

A Constitution, founded on these principles, introduces knowledge among the People, and inspires them with a conscious dignity, becoming Freemen. A general emulation takes place, which causes good humor, sociability, good manners, and good morals to be general. That elevation of sentiment, inspired by such a government, makes the common people brave and enterprising. That ambition which is inspired by it makes them sober, industrious and frugal. You will find among them some elegance, perhaps, but more solidity; a little pleasure, but a great deal of

business—some politeness, but more civility. If you compare such a country with the regions of domination, whether Monarchical or Aristocratical, you will fancy yourself in Arcadia or Elysium.

If the Colonies should assume governments separately, they should be left entirely to their own choice of the forms, and if a Continental Constitution should be formed, it should be a Congress, containing a fair and adequate Representation of the Colonies, and its authority should sacredly be confined to these cases, viz. war, trade, disputes between Colony and Colony, the Post-Office, and the unappropriated lands of the Crown, as they used to be called.

These Colonies, under such forms of government, and in such a union, would be unconquerable by all the Monarchies of Europe.

You and I, my dear Friend, have been sent into life, at a time when the greatest law-givers of antiquity would have wished to have lived. How few of the human race have ever enjoyed an opportunity of making an election of government more than of air, soil, or climate, for themselves or their children. When! Before the present epoch, had three millions of people full power and a fair opportunity to form and establish the wisest and happiest government that human wisdom can contrive? I hope you will avail yourself and your country of that extensive learning and indefatigable industry which you possess, to assist her in the formations of the happiest governments, and the best character of a great People. For myself, I must beg you to keep my name out of sight, for this feeble attempt, if it should be known to be mine, would oblige me to apply to myself those lines of the immortal John Milton, in one of his sonnets,

“I did but teach the age to quit their clogs
By the plain rules of ancient Liberty,
When lo! a barbarous noise surrounded me,
Of owls and cuckoos, asses, apes and dogs.”

Popular Democracy Is the Best Form of Government (1776)

Anonymous³

The important day is come, or near at hand, that America is to assume a form of Government for herself. We should be very desirous to know what form is best; and that surely is best which is most natural, easy, cheap, and which best secures the rights of the people. We should always keep in mind that great truth, viz that the good of the people is the ultimate end [purpose] of civil Government. As we must (some Provinces at least) in a short time assume some new mode of Government, and the matter cannot be deferred so long as to canvass, deliberately weigh, and fully adjust everything that may hereafter appear necessary, we should leave room to alter for the better in time to come. Every Province should be viewed as having a right, either with or without an application to the Continental Congress, to alter their form of Government in some particulars; and that without being liable to raise a clamor, by some who would be glad to say that it was contrary to the Constitution that they first formed upon; that it was overturning the original plan, and leaving people at uncertainties as to the foundation they are upon, and the like. As the Government is for the people, the people, when properly represented, have a right to alter it for their advantage.

Designing a Government

The affair now in view is the most important that ever was before *America*. In my opinion, it is the most important that has been transacted in any nation for some centuries past. If our civil Government is well constructed and well managed, *America* bids fair to be the most glorious State that has ever been on earth. We should now, at the beginning, lay the foundation right. Most, if not all, other governments have had a corrupt mixture in their very Constitution; they have generally been formed in haste, or out of

³ From *The Interest of America* (anonymous), 1776.

necessity, or tyrannically, or in a state of ignorance; and, being badly formed, the management of them has been with difficulty. But we have opportunity to form with some deliberation, with free choice, with good advantages for knowledge; we have opportunity to observe what has been right and what wrong in other States, and to profit by them. The plan of *American* Government should, as much as possible, be formed to suit all the variety of circumstances that people may be in—virtuous or vicious, agreeing or contending, moving regularly or convulsed by the intrigues of aspiring men; for we may expect a variety of circumstances in a course of time, and we should be prepared for every condition. We should assume that mode of Government which is most equitable and adapted to the good of mankind, and trust Providence for the event; for *God*, who determines the fate of Governments, is most likely to prosper that which is most equitable; and I think there can be no doubt that a well-regulated Democracy is most equitable. An annual or frequent choice of magistrates, who, in a year, or after a few years, are again left upon a level with their neighbors, is most likely to prevent usurpation and tyranny, and most likely to secure the privileges of the people. If rulers know that they shall, in a short term of time, be again out of power, and, it may be, liable to be called to an account of misconduct, it will guard them against maladministration. A truly popular Government has, I believe, never yet been tried in the world. The most remarkable Government that has ever been, viz: the *Roman* Republic, was something near it, but not fully so; and the want of it being fully so, kept a continual contest between the Senate and Plebeians.

America must consist of a number of confederate Provinces, Cantons, Districts, or whatever they may be called. These must be united in a General Congress; but each Province must have a distinct Legislature, and have as much power within itself as possible. The General Congress should not interfere or meddle with Provincial affairs more than needs must. Every Province should be left to do as much within itself as may be; and every Province should allow each County, yea, and each Town, to do as much within themselves as possible. Small bodies manage affairs much easier and cheaper than large ones. If every County and Town manage as much business as may be within themselves, people will be better satisfied, and the Provincial Congress saved

much trouble. Our Counties and Towns have heretofore been left to manage many of their own affairs; and it has been a great privilege, and their business has been managed to great advantage. Each County should now choose their own officers, which were heretofore appointed by the Crown. These matters may now be adjusted with much ease. Every Province should be allowed such full power within itself, and receive such advantages by a general union or confederation, that it would choose to continue in that union. The connection of the Provinces should be made to be for the interest of each, and be agreeable to each. This will keep them quiet and peaceable; and nothing will tend so much to this, as to let every Province have as much power and liberty within itself as will consist with the good of the whole. Neither the Continental Congress, nor any other number of men, should assume or use any power or office for their own sake, but for the good of the whole. Let America increase ever so much, there must never be any power like a Kingly power; no power used for its own sake, or for the advantage or dignity of any number of men, as distinct from the good of the whole; and while things are thus managed, a general union will be agreeable, and people will not complain.

Duties of a National Congress

Notwithstanding every Province should have all possible power within itself, yet some things must be left to the General Congress; as,

1. Making and managing war and making peace.
2. Settling differences between Provinces.
3. Making some maritime laws, or general regulations respecting trade; otherwise one Province might unjustly interfere with another.
4. Ordering a currency for the whole Continent; for it would be best that, as soon as may be, there should be one currency for the whole; the General Congress might order the quota for each Province.
5. The forming of new Provinces.
6. The sale of new lands.

7. Treaties with other nations; consequently some general directions for our *Indian* affairs.

As we are now to assume a new mode of Government, I think it ought properly to be new. Some are for keeping as near the old form of Government in each Province as can well be. But I think it is entirely wrong; it is mistaken policy. It is probable that some who propose it mean well; but I humbly conceive they have not thoroughly considered the thing. Others who propose it may have self-interest at bottom, hoping thereby to retain, or obtain, places of profit or honor. We must come as near a new form of Government as we can, without destroying private property. So far as private property will allow, we must form our Government in each Province just as if we had never any form of Government before. It is much easier to form a new Government than to patch up one partly old and partly new, because it is more simple and natural. I speak chiefly with respect to Legislature. We should by all means avoid several branches of Legislature.

One Branch of Legislature Best

One branch of Legislature is much preferable to more than one, because a plurality causes perpetual contention and waste of time. It was so in *Rome*; it has been so in *Great Britain*; and has been remarkably so in these Provinces in times past. The ever-memorable Congress now in *America* has done business infinitely better than if there had been several orders of Delegates to contest, interrupt, and be a negative one upon another.

A patched Government, consisting of several parts, has been the difficulty, I may call it the disease, of some of the best civil Governments that have been in the world—I mean the *Roman* Republic and the Government of *Great Britain*. Had the *Romans* been a true Democracy, without a Senate, or body different from the Plebeians, they might have avoided those jars and contentions which continually subsisted between those two bodies. Should we admit different branches of Legislature, it might give occasion in time to degenerate into that form of Government, or something like that, which has been so

oppressive in our nation. It might open a door for ill-disposed aspiring men to destroy the State. Our having several branches of Legislature heretofore is an argument against, rather than for it, in time to come, because it is a word that not only been abused, but in its nature tends to abuse. The simplest mode of legislation is certainly best. The *European* nations have, for some centuries past, derived most of their knowledge from the *Greeks* and *Romans*. The *Romans*, especially have been, in a sort, an example, being excellent in many things. We have been ready to view them so in all things. We are very apt to take in, or imitate, the imperfections as well as the excellencies of those that are excellent. Hence, I suppose, it is that most, if not all, the Republics in *Europe* have a body of Senators in their form of Government. I doubt not it will be an argument with many, that we in America must have something like a Senate, or Council, or Upper House, because the *Romans* and other Republics have had. But the argument is the other way; it was their imperfection, it was a source of trouble, it was a step towards arbitrary power, and therefore to be avoided. Free Government can better, must better, subsist without it. Different branches of Legislature cause much needless expense, two ways; First, as there are more persons to maintain; and, Second, as they waste time, and prolong a session by their contentions. Besides, it is a great absurdity that one branch of a Legislature, that can negative all the rest, should be the principal Executive power in the State. There can be but little chance for proper freedom, where the making and executing the laws of a State lie in the same hand, and that not of the people in general, but of a single person. The Legislative and Executive power in every Province ought to be kept as distinct as possible. Wise, experienced, and public-spirited persons should be in places of power, and if so, they must be sought out, chosen, and introduced. For this reason there ought not to be a number that are hereditary, for wisdom is not a birthright; nor a number put in place for life, for men's abilities and manners may change. Rulers should be frequently chose to their office. A Provincial Congress is the whole Province met by Representatives; and there is no need of a representative of a King, for we have none; nor can there be need of a Council to

represent the House of Lords, for we have not, and hope never shall have, a hereditary nobility, different from the general body of the people; but if we admit different branches of the Legislature, there is danger that there may be in time.