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Commercialism and Idealism.

By Professor Francis G. Peabody.*

AT a regular meeting of the Canadian Club, held on February 5, 1912, Professor Francis G. Peabody said:

Mr. President and "Brethren,"—(Laughter).—I shall not occupy a moment of your time with the amenities of this occasion, for my position is that of a certain minister who, on asking one of his congregation what he should preach about, received the reply: "It does not make much difference what you preach about, if you preach about twenty minutes." I must congratulate your President, however, on his remote connection with President Dunster, who in the early days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, was ejected from the President's house—with his wife, as the record says, "sick, and his children extremely so,"—not because he was derelict in his duty, but because he had fallen into the briers of Anti-paedobaptism! (Laughter).

I must congratulate myself further, gentlemen, that while, as I think, you made a mistake about commercial reciprocity, you still permit reciprocity in ideas. (Hear, hear). I am told that customs officers are perturbed at the possibilities of aerial navigation, owing to the difficulty of stopping aviators from smuggling prohibited goods. Fortunately, they never can hinder this interchange of friendship, as it passes from land to land by the aerial navigation of the spirit. I have heard once or twice since I have been in the Dominion, citizens of the United States described as Americans. I do not fancy the term. It may be a philological necessity, but it does not represent a continental idea. We are all Americans, gentlemen, sharing this vast continent, with kinship of tradition and of ideals, and as I take up the subject of to-day, I think of us as allied in purpose and hope, with the same problems to face and the same ends to achieve. (Applause).

And what is the supreme issue confronting this new civilization which, on both sides of the line, we share? It is the issue between the principles of commercialism and the principles of idealism. We are, on both sides of our boundary, commercial peoples. Most of the gentlemen before me, I assume, are occupied most of their time in making money, in advising others about making money, or in spending money. And there is nothing discreditable about money-making. On the contrary, most persons are rarely better employed than when they are engaged in procuring for themselves, or those whom they love, a competency. Industrialism is not commercialism. Commercialism is the spirit which would weigh all goods and all goodness by money values. Commercialism, for example, speaks of a "good" marriage, when there may be nothing good about it except the income. Commercialism speaks of a "successful" man, when in reality the man's life may be a failure. Commercialism fancies itself to own things, when in reality it is owned by them. Now some observers of this continent have expressed the opinion that this continent is incurably affected by the spirit of commercialism. A German political economist of great distinction says, for example: "The Americans, from oldest to youngest, hurl themselves into the chase of the dollar. Their life is all hustle, speculation, win or lose!" and he narrates how a German traveller in Chicago was at a reception planned for him, and as he was standing by the side of his host, was told the number of millions each Chicago guest possessed.

Commercialism, therefore, is a recognized malady of our civilization. "Ill fares the land," (Goldsmith says), "To hastening ills a prey; where wealth accumulates and men decay."

And, centuries before, the Prophet said: "Where there is no vision, the people perish." And wherein lies the chief peril of commercialism? It lies in its possible destruction of idealism. History abounds in the story of great nations which had possessions thrust upon them, and then lost their grasp upon the leadership of the world because they lost their idealism. Persia, Egypt, Rome, became derelicts on the ocean of time; while Greece and Judaea still carry, like seaworthy vessels, the precious cargoes of the ideals of the world!

No sooner, however, does one set before himself this peril of commercialism in a continent-conquering civilization, than he is confronted by an opposite fact. The same continent which is thus the scene of unprecedented commercialism, is also marked by an unconquerable spirit of idealism. Canada is a monument of missionary zeal. Parkman, in describing the beginnings of Quebec, asks: "Is this a romance of Christian chivalry, or is it true history? It is both." Across the great stretches from the Atlantic to the Mississippi, from the

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days when Cartier on the festival of St. Lawrence gave its name to your mighty river, and Champlain set up his "Habitation de Quebec," the spirit of romance, and chivalry, found its way across the spaces of the North; and your scrambling, striving, struggling, commercial democracy still bears the ineffaceable traces of this hereditary idealism. It is the same in the United States. English Pilgrims exiling themselves for conscience sake, gave its character to New England; Moravian missionaries sang their hymns in the forests of the Alleghanies; the Society of Friends founded a commonwealth in the name of William Penn and a city in the name of "Brotherly Love." The heritage of idealism characterises large sections of my country and plays a large part in our national and international affairs.

Thus we are confronted, both in this country and in the United States, with these two opposing forces, and the problem presented to the United States, as to you, is this: Is it possible to gain the whole world and not forfeit one's soul? Can we own a continent, and still own ourselves? Will the ideals of national life perish before the attack of commercialism? The answer to this problem is not to be found by running away from our civilization. There are people who in the interests of idealism abandon democracy. They withdraw themselves to the picturesqueness and charm of Europe, and a very pitiful company they are. They draw their income from commercialism, and spend their days in the imitation of a foreign idealism. No! Out of the heart of things as they are, out of the conditions of the democracy in which we live and want to live, we must re-establish our idealism. And I may point out two considerations which fortify one's faith as he turns thus to our future. In the first place, the very magnitude of the problems which present themselves to our American continent to-day tend to produce the spirit of idealism. No man can live in this country without thinking widely, broadly, continentally. You have to consider in your personal affairs the large interests of transcontinental traffic, of national tariffs, and international politics. A large environment calls for a large man, and no man in your circumstances can do a large business who has not the vision of the things that are to be. A distinguished American banker has recently warned the business world against theorists, and commended what he calls practical men. But the word "theorist" does not, in fact, mean what this critic supposes. *Theoria*, in its Greek sense, means nothing but seeing, and the theorist is he who sees things as they really are, or—as Matthew Arnold said of

Sophocles—"sees things steadily and sees them whole." In a world like ours, of vast possibilities and untouched resources, what is needed more than this kind of theorist? The great West of Canada would have still been a sterile plain if its possibilities had not been seen by some men of vision. Doers we have in plenty, but what we need is seers. The most practical man to-day is the theorist. The man most serviceable to expanding commercialism is the visionary.

This is one aspect of the case, and to this I must add one other fact. It is the obvious and extraordinary fact that to people like ourselves, who have learned to conquer a continent and subdue it, there have now been presented a series of social and public problems in which no other guidance can be had than the principles of idealism. What we call the labor question, with all its complications of tragic conditions, is essentially not a question of profits and wages, but a question of justice and peace. On its surface it is a mere matter of distribution, or hours, or organization. But no one can interpret the question who does not hear, within these economic problems, a human cry for justice, equality, compassion, fraternalism, a human way of life. Even the program of revolutionary socialism, which in its form is a demand for economic chance, is in its motives and force a movement of idealism. The economics of socialism may be—as I think they are—impracticable and illusory, but no economic argument is likely to check the Socialist agitation. Real opposition can be brought about only by a saner, more rational, more convincing idealism, which may give to this striving, struggling world a new ideal of social brotherhood, responsibility and peace.

I hesitate to touch upon your own affairs, of which I must speak with reserve, but I cannot help thinking that in the late decision concerning reciprocity, while there were reasons of an economic nature which seemed enough to justify the great refusal, there were non-economic reasons which determined your decision. Was there not heard throughout the Dominion a summons to national pride, an appeal to national unity, which may have been a determining factor in the vote? At any rate, it is certain that on our side of the line a politician, who hopes to have any permanent leadership with the people, must make, or pretend to make, his appeal to the conscience of the people. He must convince us that the issue he represents is between right and wrong. In short, he knows that the American people are at heart idealists, and that his hold on power is proportionate to his hold on the popular conscience.

In the face of conditions like these we may regard the future of the issue which I am now considering, not with despondency but with hope. If it be true that, "where there is no vision the people perish," and if it be true that on both sides of the line it is realized that, to be effective, appeals must be made to the moral conscience of plain people, then the great days of American Democracy are to be found not in some golden past, but in years yet to come. Some of you, no doubt, have stood at Geneva, on the bridge where two rivers meet. One is the Rhône, which has flowed quietly from pasture lands, a broad, clear stream; the other is the Aar, a turbid, glacial torrent, full of the melting snows. For a moment, as one looks over the bridge, the turbid torrent of the Aar seems to overwhelm the Rhône; but soon the glacial torrent sinks to the bottom of the larger stream, and the Rhône flows unpolluted on its way. So meet the forces of commercialism and idealism in our American life, and as one looks over the bridge of time it seems as if the future might be a turbid stream. Steadily, however, let the primitive springs of our history send down their clear supply of idealism, and the turbid torrent sinks beneath the clearer stream, and the Rhône of our Democracy will flow to the ocean of its destiny unvexed and free. (Applause.)