

DeLou Wilson

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Professor D. Mockridge

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‘Democratizing Science’: the Wisconsin Idea and Robert La Follette Sr.’s Vision for Education

There are few politicians who can claim to have won the hearts and souls of their constituencies as thoroughly as Robert Marion La Follette, Sr. Affectionately referred to as “Fighting Bob” by his voting bloc-- and, with animosity, called the same by his detractors-- La Follette is remembered above all else as a man who truly believed in the progressive politics for which he waged endless battles. To him, the everyday citizen was the most important unit of American society. It was this underlying philosophy that drove him to dismantle with indefatigable purpose the system of political bosses that kept Wisconsin in a stranglehold in the late 19th century. Of course, the parties involved were not enthusiastic to give up their power, and utilized an arsenal of political tricks to repress La Follette’s policies. So La Follette went directly to the voters for his political mandate, utilizing massive campaigns in public education to inform urban and rural citizens of the issues affecting them. In doing so, he thought that the farmer and the factory worker alike would participate more actively in democracy. His close association with the University of Wisconsin inspired the faculty to follow in his footsteps, and from this the University Extension System and the Wisconsin Idea were born. La Follette’s progressive movement would never achieve the political reform it strove for; however, his and the university’s efforts in educating Wisconsinites drastically changed the way that the state interacted with education as a whole and produced the University of Wisconsin system of today.

There has been more than enough scholarship on La Follette's life and political achievements, but any discussion of him merits a glance at his life. Robert M. La Follette was born into simple means. On June 14, 1855, he was born to a pioneer family in a log cabin in a village named Primrose, located about twenty miles southwest of Madison. He did not lead a charmed childhood, needing at the age of fourteen to drop out of high school and manage his family's farm.¹ Eventually, he was able to matriculate at the University of Wisconsin, but to afford the schooling he received a scholarship and worked odd jobs on the side. At the university, he met and would later marry Belle Case, the first woman to receive a law degree from the UW. She had also attended school on a scholarship, and here one sees the beginning of their sense of duty to the state; one scholar writes that "they were equally convinced that they owed something to the taxpayers of the state, who had footed the bill for their education."² They graduated from the university in 1879. Robert La Follette continued his studies with the intention of becoming a lawyer, and passed the bar later that year.

As a poor young professional, he was soon enticed to run for the office of Dane County District Attorney in 1880, ostensibly because of the salary it provided.³ At the time, however, the candidacies for political positions were decided by the political boss of the region, E.W. Keyes, "the most powerful man in the state, a maker of governors and United States senators."⁴ La Follette, either ignorant of this fact or spurning it did not seek Keyes's blessing and wound up running against the boss's own candidate. Leveraging the local notoriety he had gained from his

¹ Debra Bernhardt, "'Fighting Bob' La Follette" in Darryl Holter, *Workers and Unions in Wisconsin* (State Historical

Society of Wisconsin: 1999) 96.

² Bernard A. Weisberger, *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America* (University of Wisconsin Press: 1994) xv.

³ Robert La Follette, *A Personal Narrative of Political Experiences* (The Robert M. La Follette Co.: 1911) 5.

⁴ Frederic Howe, *Wisconsin: an Experiment in Democracy* (Charles Scribner's Sons: 1913) 4.

oratory and from odd jobs, La Follette campaigned on horseback, barely eking out a win.⁵ La Follette had now experienced a political boss, but it would not be the last time.

In 1884, after serving two terms as District Attorney, La Follette was convinced by a friend to run for U.S. Congress. He would go on to serve three terms in the Congress, all of which were pockmarked by political bossism. At the time, La Follette was not equipped to battle the forces at play, but he did what he could. One episode in particular stands out. The young congressman had been placed on the Indian Affairs Committee, mainly because he was acquainted with the senior senator from his state, a man named Philetus Sawyer, a millionaire lumber baron and political boss based in Oshkosh. La Follette opposed and

succeeded in killing a measure that provided for the sale to private interests of the pine timber from the Menominee Indian reservation in northern Wisconsin. The bill had been introduced at the request of Senator Philetus Sawyer.⁶

Sawyer admonished La Follette, and the latter fell into the party line, but he did not forget the incident. La Follette served three terms as a congressman before being ousted in 1890.

Full radicalization for La Follette came soon afterwards. Back home in Wisconsin, a round of embezzlement lawsuits had been levelled against various state politicians for skimming off of the state treasury. The defendants included Senator Sawyer who was “sued personally for \$300,000.”⁷ Sawyer personally invited La Follette to Milwaukee under a pretense of friendship. Once there, Sawyer attempted to bribe La Follette to have Judge Robert Siebecker, La Follette’s brother-in-law and the judge presiding over Sawyer’s case, decide the cases ‘correctly.’ La Follette refused all money. Days before the case was to be heard, Siebecker stepped away from

⁵ Ibid 5.

⁶ Edward Doan, *The La Follettes and the Wisconsin Idea* (Ferris Printing Company: 1947) 20.

⁷ Howe 10.

the case, presumably because La Follette had informed him of the incident, but neither man went public with the knowledge. Unfortunately, “the lawsuits were an ongoing sensational story, and reporters, smelling something suspicious, leaped in and began pumping their sources.”⁸ A Chicago newspaper was the first to break a story about bribery. There was no mention of Philetus Sawyer, but the millionaire preemptively and publicly claimed innocence. He claimed that he had simply entreated La Follette to join him as a defense lawyer. La Follette was forced to come out with his side of the story, much to his personal discomfort. In doing so, he made an open enemy of Sawyer. The full force of Sawyer’s political machine was turned against him. He was vilified and slandered throughout the boss-subsidized newspapers as someone who had “split the party asunder.”⁹ It was a harsh rebuke, but one that defined his life thereafter. He had seen now that the boss system was corrupt, and thereafter devoted his life to destroying the system.

From 1891 to 1900, La Follette campaigned tirelessly for a progressive governor who would oppose boss control. During this decade, “the Fighting Bob of legend was born.”¹⁰ After reclaiming ties within the Republican party by campaigning for presidential candidate Benjamin Harrison in 1892, he would go on to begin an insurgency. In 1894, he convinced his former colleague, Congressman Nils P. Haugen, to run for governor. It was an unsuccessful campaign, but proved a beginning. La Follette himself campaigned for governor in 1896, 1898, and finally successfully in 1900.¹¹ Throughout this decade, La Follette found that his biggest issue was not finding enough support among the voters, but that the political bosses maintained complete

⁸ Weisberger 29.

⁹ Howe 11. La Follette, aside from a very late break into a Progressive Party, would remain a staunch Republican all his life. Sawyer was also Republican.

¹⁰ Weisberger 31.

¹¹ At this time, Governors served two-year terms.

control through caucuses and delegates. During the 1890s, the state still nominated candidates through a caucus system. This made it fairly easy for the bosses of the time to control the delegates, sometimes through buying their loyalty, and push their own candidates through. La Follette's successful campaign rested upon a two-pronged platform actively opposing this control. As such, he was elected on a policy of direct primary and fair taxation of railroads.

During his three terms as governor, from 1900-1906, La Follette actually managed to get legislation establishing both aspects of his platform passed. That said, his intentions behind the reforms were always to destroy the system of money and power that produced political bosses. In analyzing the state of politics, he says in his autobiography *A Personal Narrative of Political Experiences* that "I believed then, as I believe now, that the only salvation for the Republican party lies in purging itself wholly from the influence of financial interests."¹² Throughout the piece, this theme above all else pervades, one must remember that his political radicalization occurred because of an attempted bribe. Furthermore, he actively saw the destructive power of vested interests with money when attempting to pass his reforms. He recalls an episode, on the eve of the vote which would pass a bill for fair railroad taxation, where he calls an unnamed senator who he describes as "a fine young fellow, and regarded as thoroughly reliable... I trusted him absolutely" to his office.¹³ He had heard word that this senator was going to vote against the bill. When asked about it, La Follette reports that the senator teared up and said "I have told you all about that factory of mine. I have told you about how proud I was of the thing... This railroad lobby tells me that if I vote for that railroad taxation bill they will ruin me in business. They can take away everything I've got."¹⁴ The senator voted against the bill, against his own volition. An

¹² La Follette 76.

¹³ Ibid 260.

¹⁴ Ibid 262.

innumerable set of examples like this can be found in La Follette's writing. From them, it is clear that La Follette's intention was always to loosen the power that monied interests held over politics. In this, despite his legislative success, he failed. One need only look at the contemporary system of PACs and super-donors to see that.

Despite the failure of his political action, however, La Follette's influence remains prevalent throughout the State, especially in the form of the Wisconsin Idea. The Wisconsin Idea, a sort of practical philosophy described first in University President Charles Van Hise's 1905 address to the Press Corps and expounded upon later in Charles McCarthy's 1912 monograph entitled *The Wisconsin Idea*, stemmed from the close contact with the University of Wisconsin at Madison that La Follette kept throughout his political career. La Follette, an alumni of the University himself, states that "it is difficult, indeed, to overestimate the part which the university has played in the Wisconsin revolution."¹⁵ In this statement, he was referring specifically to the political influences that he experienced whilst attending the university as well as its later role as a brain trust and recruiting pool for his gubernatorial tenure, but, in light of more recent developments in his political legacy, this statement seems especially prescient. Ultimately, the Wisconsin Idea's focus on public education forms a greater portion of La Follette's legacy than his legislative achievements. However, the Wisconsin Idea, being born from La Follette's progressive movement, had a distinct political agenda that it, too, would fail at applying.

The man often credited with first voicing the Wisconsin Idea is Charles Van Hise. Like La Follette, Van Hise was a native Wisconsinite, born a farmer's son in 1857 in Fulton, a small

¹⁵ Ibid 26.

town south of Madison. He also attended the University of Wisconsin on a scholarship, where he met and became a lifelong friend of La Follette's. The latter, in fact, puts Van Hise on a short list of friends who stuck by him through the Sawyer controversy of the early 1890s.¹⁶ Van Hise was a savant geologist, the first of the University of Wisconsin's Ph.D. recipients, and its first alumnus president. While he was never actively involved in politics, Van Hise served his state as a geological expert through both the Wisconsin Geological Survey and the United States Geological Survey. One major position that he held was a field worker in northern Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula's iron districts, where he was to help gather "information as might be of assistance to miners searching for iron ore."¹⁷ To him, using his scientific abilities to help the citizens of the state was just as ingrained as La Follette's compulsion to help the common citizen.

Van Hise and La Follette, because of their close friendship, matching ideologies, and professional positions, formed and maintained a close relationship between the state government and the state university. This relationship is fully realized in the Wisconsin Idea. The Wisconsin Idea is a somewhat slippery topic to fully define, but the general sentiment can be found in Van Hise's 'founding' speech, in which he states that he "shall never be content until the beneficent influence of the university reaches every family of the state."¹⁸ In essence, the Wisconsin Idea is predicated upon the university and the state acting as parental figures for the common citizens of Wisconsin. Charles McCarthy, a lecturer in political science at the university and founder of Wisconsin's legislative library, fully outlines this in his 1912 monograph, *The Wisconsin Idea*.

¹⁶ Ibid 162.

¹⁷ Maurice Vance, *Charles Richard Van Hise: Scientist Progressive* (The State Historical Society of Wisconsin: 1960) 33.

¹⁸ Charles Van Hise, "Address before Press Association," February 1905, accessed at wisc.edu/wisconsin-idea/.

Throughout the book, McCarthy speaks about the need for state legislators to rely upon the intelligentsia to aid them in drafting bills, as well as in providing scientific data with which they can regulate large corporations. But, again, the intention was not simply to regulate society more precisely.

Like La Follette's personal politics, the main political agenda of the Wisconsin Idea was to get money out of politics and defeat the bosses. The first chapter of *The Wisconsin Idea*, entitled "The Reason For It" opens with a discussion of the destructive power of concentrated wealth on society. McCarthy writes that

there is really but one cause [for the Wisconsin Idea] and it presents but one problem, which is basic to all others, and no advancement of human welfare or progress of civilization can take place until a solution is found... Monopoly-- Trusts -- Trusts and the tariff-- High cost of living-- Predatory Wealth... Always the same-- something strong and oppressive, almost unreachable, in some way entangled with courts, lawyers and litigation-- always having the power to attain its object-- always possessing FORCE.¹⁹

He argues essentially that, in the early twentieth century, society was entirely unequal. More than unequal, however, it was unfair. The laissez-faire system favors those who already have money and power, and because of this, those without are forced into deals and transactions that inherently do not favor them. This is the force about which he speaks. In other words, as McCarthy puts it, society is plagued by "unequal conditions of contract."²⁰ This problem logically begs the question of how to solve it. He, of course, argues that social darwinism does not, and has not worked. Overthrow of business likewise does not work because "the man who has FORCE is the employer of men and women. Little homes and villages and the happiness of thousands depend upon him... he is a part of us and we cannot 'tear him to pieces."²¹ McCarthy

¹⁹ Charles McCarthy, *The Wisconsin Idea* (The MacMillan Company: 1912) 1.

²⁰ Ibid 2.

²¹ Ibid 6.

here attempts to appeal to common sense reforms in order to better society. Breaking monopolies is well and good, but not the only answer. The answer to the problem “must be complex and varied,” but at the same time “great and glaring wrongs can be righted.”²² These glaring wrongs are the ones he opened the book with: the monopolies and trusts that can manipulate the courts into deciding in their favor, or at least delay the court system long enough that the lower classes cannot seek justice through the courts.

This is a dangerous path for society to follow. He argues that many great societies have gone through the same trials and failed. He summarizes the problems, saying that previous societies failed “because men forgot that prosperity exists for the *benefit of the human being and for no other purpose*.”²³ This seems to be the underlying axiom of the entire Wisconsin Idea, and the purpose, therefore, is to finagle the systems to expand the wealth of society. McCarthy explains the methods to accomplish this in the form of a parable about a German prince. The prince finds one day that his domain is in shambles; it is financially dysfunctional on account of wars and famine on account of incompetent farmers. He assigns his treasurer as regent to fix the issue and he

drove out the cheating rascals who had acted as judges; he punished the drunken soldier; he protected the weak against the strong; he imprisoned the usurer and dismissed the tax farmer; he provided markets and exchanges which were honest; he invested heavily in roads and bridges; but best of all he taught the MAN.²⁴

In this, the points of the Wisconsin Idea are seen. Namely, they manifest themselves in the same governmental changes which are expressed in La Follette’s political agenda: establishing regulations which curb the force involved in monopolies and ending governmental corruption.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid 11. Italics within original work.

²⁴ Ibid 12-13.

Likewise, the intention behind these regulations are the same, and they, like La Follette's intentions, were never fully carried out. In the end, therefore, the politics of the Wisconsin Idea are the same as La Follette's ultimate philosophy, a "mixture of government by popular will and trained, disinterested intelligence"²⁵ which can function without the issues caused by wealthy bosses governing for their own self-benefit.

That said, the reforms that this political methodology brought about were ultimately unsuccessful, as their intended result of creating a more equal society and destroying political bossism was never achieved. This philosophy did, however, have a profound impact on how the common citizen interpreted their own place within society. Both La Follette and the Wisconsin Idea were highly individualistic in their own interpretations of society; that is, they emphasize the importance of the individual, and the aggregate thereof, in making a wholly democratic system. La Follette, especially, saw the importance of the individual, especially in the face of a corrupt societal system. He states that, when he was a young lawyer and the Dane county District Attorney, he saw every crime as an individual's choice, but "since then I have come to have a little different point of view... the individual criminal is not always wholly to blame; many crimes grow directly out of the sins and injustices of society."²⁶ As he grew, he describes his growing interactions with a fully-fledged system of political bossism leading to an epiphany caused by Senator Sawyer's attempted bribe in 1891. He states that the bribe "shocked me into a complete realization of the extremes to which *the power that Sawyer represented* would go to secure the results it was after."²⁷ Here, La Follette begins to diagnose the societal implications behind the political system against which he would become famous for rebelling. Later, as he

²⁵ Weisberger xii,

²⁶ La Follette 41.

²⁷ Ibid 147. Italics added.

describes the beating he suffered at the hands of the newspapers, he describes coming to a sense of forgiveness for the specific politicians against whom he had clashed. He writes that

during that winter of 1891-92... I went back over my political experiences. I thought over many things that had occurred during my service in the House. I began to understand their relation. I had seen the evils singly-- here and there a manifest wrong... But I had been subjected to a terrible shock that opened my eyes... I found now no bitterness and little resentment left in me against individuals. The men of that time filled their places in a system of things.²⁸

La Follette found that he was up against an entrenched system of money and power that manifested itself in the specific men and legislation with which he conflicted; even so, in La Follette's eyes, it was not ultimately their fault that American politics were so corrupted. It was machine politics, not individual bosses, that so thoroughly antagonized the common citizen. Perhaps the most poignant example of this philosophy comes from the first issue of *La Follette's Weekly*, wherein La Follette writes that the magazine "shall have no strife with individuals *as individuals*. If they serve special interests, to the injury of the public, they are enemies of the public."²⁹ It was necessary to dismantle this system, so he devoted himself to doing so.

To combat the system, La Follette placed his trust in the common citizen. Throughout his autobiography, he continually writes of his going directly to the people. The legend of "Fighting Bob," of course, begins with his campaign on horseback for the position of Dane County District Attorney. He is completely consistent in this point, stating at one point that "to the character of the people of Wisconsin I attribute the progress which we were able to make against machine control."³⁰ La Follette also cites the integrity of the individual voter as the reason he stayed within the Republican Party during the 1890s. He states as much, saying that "I had well

²⁸ Ibid 163.

²⁹ "Claiming Our Privilege to Serve," *La Follette's Weekly* 1, no. 1 (1909) 3. Accessed at HathiTrustbabel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101074878891;view=1up;seq=18. Italics within text.

³⁰ La Follette 224.

considered the wisdom of making my fight against the corrupt organization in Wisconsin in the Republican party... I believed in the integrity of the rank and file of the party.”³¹ It is because of this commitment to the individual voter that he would later fight so heartily for the direct primary system. Indeed, after La Follette’s defeat at the Republican State Convention in 1896, achieved via bribing pro-La Follette delegates to swap their support to another candidate, La Follette’s supporters advocated full separation from the party. La Follette opposed that idea, reminding his aides “that the people had not betrayed us, but that they themselves had been betrayed by those whom they had sent to serve them... if any one was forced to leave the Republican party it should be the corrupt leaders.”³² Again, La Follette demonstrates a wholehearted belief in the individual voter, and attempts to show how the system oppresses an individual voter. He returns time after time to the importance of the individual in destroying the political bosses.

But ultimately, La Follette realizes that the status quo will continue if the individual is left as is. No effort he could put forth on his own would be able to stand against the political strength of the machine, and, if left to its own devices, the machine would continue unhindered. The only way to combat this, ultimately, is to educate the populace on civic issues. His thoughts on this are unequivocal, and very blunt; he states that

machine control is based upon misrepresentation and ignorance. Democracy is based upon knowledge. It is of first importance that the people shall know about their government and the work of their public servants. ‘Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.’ This I have always believed vital.³³

La Follette would later take the bible verse, John 8:32, for the motto of his most notable example of public education: the publication of *La Follette’s Weekly* in 1909, a project which he

³¹ Ibid 171.

³² Ibid 195.

³³ Ibid 64.

maintained at great personal cost, and which is still published bimonthly under the title *The Progressive*.³⁴ A main purpose of the magazine was to keep La Follette's constituents informed of the issues facing the common voter. In its inaugural issue, it claims to be "founded in the belief that it can aid in making our government represent with more fidelity the will of the people."³⁵ This, of course, means that it will attempt to keep the constituency informed of governmental officials' doings. The magazine claims multiple times to appeal to truth-- its subscription advertisement describes it as "a publication that will not mince words or suppress facts," as well as its aforementioned motto-- and its weekly section entitled "The Roll Call" indicts the voting records of specific officials who vote against Progressive issues.³⁶ Of this section, La Follette writes that "it is simply a form of publicity... which has presented accurately the records of many Senators and Congressman, and has been instrumental... in putting more than one bad Congressman or Senator out of business."³⁷ In sum, the magazine, while heavily weighted in one direction, nevertheless serves as an educational tool specifically utilized by La Follette to increase the knowledge of the average voter. However, *La Follette's Weekly* was not the first system by which La Follette informed his supporters; in fact, the magazine came about very late in his career, after he had left state office and became a Senator in D.C. Public education was a motif throughout La Follette's life and political career, beginning with his very first campaign for District Attorney.

La Follette, throughout his life, used both the power of the press as well as intrapersonal communication to inform those around him. *La Follette's Weekly* has already been mentioned,

³⁴ "About," *The Progressive*. Accessed at progressive.org/about-us/about

³⁵ "Claiming our Privilege to Serve" 1.

³⁶ Front Matter, *La Follette's Weekly* 1, no. 1 (1909) 2. Accessed at HathiTrust.babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101074878891;view=1up;seq=18

³⁷ La Follette 339-340.

and its publication cannot be understated. In order to publish it, La Follette opened his own press in Madison, through which he would print and distribute the publication. This press would also be used to later publish his autobiography. An extraordinarily early prototype of the magazine was during his tenure as congressman in the late 1880s. At this time, La Follette ordered a list of those who had voted in the 1884 election in his district. Afterwards, he “sent the sheets to a friend in each county who filled in all the information he could, indicating especially the strong men in each community-- those who were the leaders of sentiment,” essentially the ones who would talk politics among their neighbors.³⁸ To these folks, La Follette sent a curated set of speeches made on whatever issue was being debated in congress. In this way, he kept his constituency educated. Later La Follette began to turn specifically to newspapers as a conduit to the people. In 1897, while he was forming his insurgency, his friends and supporters took over a newspaper called *Old Dane*, giving it to support La Follette’s progressive cause. They renamed the paper *The State*, and La Follette speaks of it with great relief, saying that “we now had a medium through which to maintain from week to week a campaign of education.”³⁹ It is in this paper, actually, that La Follette first announced his platform for reform. Throughout his life, he continually utilized print media with the express purpose of expanding public knowledge.

Print media, however, was only the beginning of his educational efforts. La Follette, to begin, was notorious for the number of letters he would write. Weisberger, in the introduction to his monograph, writes that “Bob and Belle believed in and lived by the power and beauty of spoken and written words... When travel separated them they corresponded almost daily... And almost all of these thousands of letters are still available.”⁴⁰ In fact, such a wealth of archival

³⁸ Ibid 65.

³⁹ Ibid 208.

⁴⁰ Weisberger xv.

material still exists as allowed Weisberger to write a full biography of the La Follette family based nearly entirely on their letters to each other. Of course, that has little to do with public education, but it goes to show the wealth of written word that La Follette could pump out. Another example of this is the doomed 1894 gubernatorial campaign for Nils Haugen. By his own count, La Follette sent out 1200 letters on behalf of the candidate, in the course of a year.⁴¹ Throughout his life, he corresponded with friends, admirers, and acquaintances, answering their questions and sending facts their way in an attempt to expand their knowledge. Saving the most important for last, however, it is important to note that La Follette was, and is, widely considered one of the greatest orators of his time. His campaigns were carried out on horseback and on plain-old simple stumps. Howe writes that, while campaigning for reelection as governor, specifically on the platform of the direct primary, “La Follette carried the relentless logic of statistics to the county fairs and showed the people how they were being plundered.”⁴² In conversation, letters, speeches, and publications, “Fighting Bob” used statistics and logic to educate the populace on matters pertaining to the government, with the ultimate goal that personal education would lead to more engaged majority, comprised of individualistic citizens.

With much of the same intentions, the professors behind Wisconsin Idea launched themselves into improving public education with the intent of making better citizens. In his conclusion, McCarthy speaks at length about being labeled a socialist, a name which he despises, solely because he is advocating a regulatory role for the government. Instead, he says, he is arguing the exact antithesis of socialism, which he defines as “state ownership of all the instruments of production.”⁴³ In other words, he argues that socialist politics is that of the

⁴¹ La Follette 180.

⁴² Howe 17.

⁴³ McCarthy 298.

collective, not the individual. To combat this, instead he states that he advocates societal reforms because

the individual initiative and the efficiency of the individual caused by the breaking up of class distinctions, the establishment of merit and ability in the place of family or title... will lead to an individuality which will cause men to press forward in the acquisition of private property... Provide the ladder... and human beings will climb.⁴⁴

McCarthy here argues that the Wisconsin Idea is a path to meritocracy, where each individual is judged based on their own skills, knowledge, and ability, instead of a system of patronage and inheritance dictating their social standing. Regulations on business and fair taxation, as advocated by the Wisconsin Idea and the university intelligentsia, are actually a route to an individualistic system, not a collective one.

This goes hand in hand with the theme of public education found throughout *The Wisconsin Idea*. In the final paragraphs, McCarthy asks a series of leading questions, the most important of which is, speaking about very low socioeconomic classes, “can we not destroy them [the classes] by means of education and through hope and encouragement make every man more efficient so that the door of opportunity may always be open before him?”⁴⁵ McCarthy very specifically advocates two routes through which the Wisconsin Idea must be accomplished and through which America becomes a more wholesome place. The latter, the ‘hope and encouragement,’ are the governmental reforms discussed earlier in this paper, which attempt to regulate society so that force is equalized. The former is education, through which the best and brightest can advance. To explain further, one may return to the parable of the German treasurer mentioned when defining the Wisconsin Idea. In it, McCarthy notes that the most important

⁴⁴ Ibid 298-299.

⁴⁵ Ibid 303.

thing in the treasurer's reform is individual education; he states "best of all he [the treasurer] taught the MAN. He made a better man, a more efficient machine; he taught him how to be a better farmer."⁴⁶ Later, he repeats the point, stating that "the German treasurer in the story went down to the unit-- the *Man*."⁴⁷ Again, the sentiment is plainly laid out: in order to produce a more prosperous society, each individual must be educated.

More specifically, the Wisconsin Idea advocates giving the common citizen the resources for self-improvement and education. The philosophy behind educating down to the unit is fully based in a 'teach a man to fish' mentality. The next line in *The Wisconsin Idea* reads "why not teach the man to look out for his own interests?"⁴⁸ In other words, teach the citizens to think for themselves. This manifests itself throughout the university's implementation of the Wisconsin Idea. The first few issues of *La Follette's Weekly* contain articles written about university programs created with progressive intentions. The first, entitled "The Farmer at College," discusses a program called the farmer's course, essentially a two-week series of practical masterclasses for adult farmers. Speaking on the success of the program, a university dean details a letter he received which essentially said the education convinced the author of the letter to try new methods and experiment. The dean writes "there is the real heart of it. The practical instruction a man gets is valuable only in proportion to the stimulus it gives him to experiment on his own farm."⁴⁹ Later on, the dean continues, noting the interplay between the students of the course. He states that there is "a mutual exchange of ideas. The course brings hundred of farmers together... and discuss freely their problems, and the experiments they have made... So they all

⁴⁶ Ibid 13.

⁴⁷ Ibid 15.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ "The Farmer at College," *La Follette's Weekly* 1, no. 2 (1909) 15. Accessed at HathiTrust babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101074878891;view=1up;seq=18

educate one another.”⁵⁰ The dean also seems to imply here that the farmers will disseminate the knowledge they obtain through their communities. Essentially, the farmer’s course teaches one person a simple skill and they, through experimentation and further investigation, build on the schooling. As McCarthy says, give them a ladder and they will climb. A later issue has an article with different specifics, but the same sentiment. Entitled “Trade Schools and University Extension for Wisconsin,” this article essentially details another set of outreach programs the university created, specifically trade schools. In this article, the author notes that the intention of expanding trade schools is to “make it possible for every young man to equip himself for some fundamental trade.”⁵¹ Note that in this quote, it very specifically says that the students will equip themselves. The university takes on a passive role. Through comments like these, those involved in the Wisconsin Idea make it very clear that they don’t need to actively educate the populace; instead, if they simply make education available, an individual’s own curiosity or desire for self-improvement will propel them.

The effect this philosophy had on Wisconsin society was not ultimately the intended one. La Follette hoped that his education would keep him, and other progressives, in power. With the office, he could use the political mandate to constantly continue dismantling the system of money and power. Indeed, it did have this effect, and it was far-reaching beyond his own death. Both of his sons, Philip La Follette and Robert La Follette Jr., would hold political office in Wisconsin. By the end of their tenures, with the election of Joseph McCarthy to the Senate in 1946, a La Follette had held office for 46 years straight. Both Roosevelt presidencies made progressive political leaps; however, these weren’t eternal. Expanded education did nothing to

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ “Trade Schools and the University Extension for Wisconsin,” *La Follette’s Weekly* 1, no. 4 (1909) 12. Accessed at HathiTrust babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101074878891;view=1up;seq=18

prevent McCarthyism in the fifties, nor was money in politics eliminated. Instead, the ultimate effect of the Wisconsin Idea's educational individualism on the Wisconsin psyche was to shift the attitude towards the university, and towards education. That is to say, it normalized education and placed the university in everyday conversation.

The public-at-large seemed to genuinely, and positively, respond to the Wisconsin Idea, especially as it affected them. The political philosophy of the Wisconsin Idea were central to its implementation and its existence, but not to its reception. A plethora of faculty threw themselves into legislation, but this was a somewhat esoteric portion of the Wisconsin Idea. The general voter was aware that the legislature utilized the expertise of university professors, but the common reception was that this was the governor's doing. Indeed, it was the governor who had to actively appoint persons to commissions. As such, professors avoided quite a bit of bad publicity. What bad blood did come to the surface, furthermore, was covered by a general feeling of good will towards the university. Vance, Van Hise's biographer, notes that the key aspect of the tenure of Van Hise's predecessor, President Charles Adams, was as a general "era of good feeling."⁵² He continues, saying that Van Hise "did not, in beginning his administration, have to labor to build up a feeling of good will toward the University on the part of the people."⁵³ In light of this, the use of professors as technical advisors on governmental committees did not generally affect the opinion of the university.

The university did, however, use this good will to great effect to ingratiate itself into everyday life. President Van Hise did not invent many of the programs he would push, nor did he himself reinvigorate them. It was his opinion as president that he would "do nothing that I can

⁵² Vance 85.

⁵³ Ibid.

get any one else to do.”⁵⁴ That said, it was under his tenure that the university and its Wisconsin Idea would transform into a household name. The main conduit that was used was the University Extension System. Originally started in 1885 by President Chamberlin, the University Extension System was originally an allotment made for the farmer’s classes mentioned above, in the *La Follette’s Weekly* article, as well as a longer curriculum called the short course.⁵⁵ However, the idea, originally popular, had fallen into obscurity. Soon after Van Hise was elected President, a few men who served on the state library commission, most notably Charles McCarthy, began pressuring him to revive university extension efforts, namely to relieve some of the library commission's burden of keeping up with requests for information. Another reason for this, however, was a study of correspondence courses in Wisconsin. McCarthy reported to Van Hise that

some 35,000 people residing in Wisconsin were enrolled in private correspondence schools... He stated that the schools, when properly conducted, did much good; insisted that the University of Wisconsin had ample facilities to do better work than was being done; and recommended the vigorous development of University correspondence courses.⁵⁶

President Van Hise agreed, and brought in Louis Reber as director of the newly revitalized extension system. Reber was instrumental in making the new program work; one important aspect of what he did was to note that the vast majority of Wisconsinites taking correspondence courses, or participating in the farmer’s and short courses, wanted highly practical, vocational education. At the peak of the university’s correspondence courses, nearly 80,000 people had registered, of these, roughly 26,000 were registered for business and around 23,000 for

⁵⁴ Quoted on Vance 76.

⁵⁵ Vance 84.

⁵⁶ Merle Curti & Vernon Carstensen, *The University of Wisconsin: A History 1848-1925, Volume II* (University of Wisconsin Press: 1949) 558.

engineering of one form or another.⁵⁷ As such, Reber found it necessary to avoid the esotericism and elitism that came from full-time professors. After all, they would be teaching mainly rural citizens with little in the way of formal education. The extension system hired its own staff and when McCarthy published *The Wisconsin Idea* in 1912 he reports that there were “ninety-eight professors and instructors” as well as “fifty-seven local classes in organized districts which the professors visit.”⁵⁸ The university system’s correspondence school was massive, and brought the university to nearly every doorstep.

Agricultural courses felt a similar expansion. The farmer’s course, nearing its demise at the close of the century, was brought back to the fore during the latter half of the new century’s first decade. The article “The Farmer at College” reports that the winter of 1908 saw 701 farmers taking the farmer’s course, “crowding the lecture rooms to overflowing and taxing the capacity of the laboratories to the utmost.”⁵⁹ That number continued to expand, in 1911 the course had 1305 students.⁶⁰ The longer ‘Short Courses,’ and the four-year track were also revitalized. During the winter of 1910, 475 farm kids enrolled in the twelve week short course and there were 364 students pursuing a degree in agriculture, 34 of which were graduate students.⁶¹ Agricultural curriculum has also “been placed in the high schools, manual training has been provided, state inspection and regulation have been secured and a high order of educational enterprise has resulted.”⁶² In other words, heavy investments were made to lift up the rural poor with the hopes of creating a more prosperous and fertile Wisconsin. And these investments were

⁵⁷ Ibid 573. The reported numbers are probably tallied over the course of the correspondence courses’ existence.

⁵⁸ McCarthy 133.

⁵⁹ “The Farmer at College” 7.

⁶⁰ Howe 169.

⁶¹ Ibid 167-168.

⁶² McCarthy 127.

responded to: farmers opted in to the extra educational opportunities. Howe claims that there were “more students enrolled outside of the university than there are at Madison.”⁶³

That said, expanding vocational coursework aided the Wisconsin Idea a great deal, but it was not the only way method through which the university interacted. The University Extension System was extraordinarily multifaceted, at times annoyingly so. In the end though, it all came back to campaigns of public education. One that is mentioned multiple times is an anti-tuberculosis exhibit in October of 1911 which McCarthy guesses that the campaign “reached some 112,000 people in this state.”⁶⁴ This campaign was conducted through the department of information and welfare which “supplies lecturers and entertainments” and “offers readings from Shakespeare and humorous recitals.”⁶⁵ This department also served the function that McCarthy originally petitioned for, answering requests for information. Howe describes this as not only answering letters, but it also “aims to convert into popular form the great fund of useful information in the form of bulletins issued by federal and state departments, and to distribute it to the people desiring information. It translates the language of the scientist into popular form”⁶⁶ In addition to scientific and informational bulletins, President Van Hise made it a priority to keep citizens informed of the university’s current events, especially its own efforts in university extension. One of the first moves of his presidency was to appoint a press secretary whose mission was to “foster a growing awareness among the people of the state the people of the state that the activity of the University was not circumscribed by the Madison campus.”⁶⁷ The University Extension System’s efforts, correspondence courses, the agricultural education, and

⁶³ Howe 141.

⁶⁴ McCarthy 134.

⁶⁵ Howe 155.

⁶⁶ Ibid 153.

⁶⁷ Vance 78.

focused public education campaigns, when taken in sum, demonstrate the depth and breadth of the university's commitment to its state.

It may even be an understatement to say that the University of Wisconsin made leaps towards accomplish Van Hise's vision for the university's "beneficent influence." The Wisconsin Idea became a household name, and higher education became normalized. Publicized as it was to the general populace, that is to say, right next to every educational opportunity the University Extension System offered, it became conflated with the efforts, even as it became a household name. One article in particular, entitled "Potato Exhibit to be Greatest," is representative of the attitude in newspapers statewide. This article, published in *The Rib Lake Herald* in 1918, advertises, as seems evident from the title, a conference on potato growing happening in Milwaukee. It states that "this Potato Show will be the largest single crop exposition ever promoted, and is another outcome of the progressive 'Wisconsin Idea.'"⁶⁸ This casual reference has massive implications, especially given the rurality of Rib Lake. Even today, the town has a population under 1,000 and is far into the Northwoods.⁶⁹ The fact that it is interested in an educational exhibition in Milwaukee, the article states that the host organization "has prepared elaborate technical programs with subjects and speakers dealing with every important phase of education in potato culture," is exactly the intended result of the Wisconsin Idea.⁷⁰ Its simply the cherry on top that the newspaper is self-aware enough to give the university credit. Additionally, the article dropping the name without any other context demonstrates the

⁶⁸ "Potato Exhibit to be Greatest." *Rib Lake Herald*, November 15, 1918. Web.

⁶⁹ "Village Information," *riblakewisconsin.com*. Web

⁷⁰ "Potato Exhibit to be Greatest." *Rib Lake Herald*, November 15, 1918. Web.

depth to which the university has penetrated everyday life. The Wisconsin Idea had truly become a household name, and it truly had ‘democratized science,’ as McCarthy and Howe liked to say.

Furthermore, despite the deep ties that the Wisconsin Idea had to La Follette’s progressive movement, its educational aspects enjoyed the implicit support of the same ‘stalwart’ Republicans that so viciously opposed its political implementation. While the fight for railroad taxation and the direct primary took all of La Follette’s strength, funding the effort to reinvigorate the extension system was startlingly simple. One scholar notes that the

statutes to authorize the regents to carry on educational extension and correspondence teaching and provided an annual appropriation of \$20,000 for the support of this work... was finally approved by a unanimous vote. In the Senate it was approved in two days, again by a unanimous vote.⁷¹

It is obvious from the outcome of this vote that the Wisconsin Idea’s educational aims had an extraordinary political mandate. Even if one argues that this vote, taken in 1907, was pushed through under an extraordinarily progressive government, and that perhaps skews the weight of that evidence. However, Howe points out that, in 1885, E.W. Keyes, the boss who attempted to block La Follette from becoming District Attorney right out of college, was a regent of the university. He, among others, made the initial push to allocate funds for the farmer’s course.⁷²

Wisconsin bosses had helped start the university’s outreach, and they supported it when it made its resurgence under the Wisconsin Idea, progressive politics or not.

So, from all of this, it seems clear that La Follette, and the men behind the Wisconsin Idea, succeeded in their educational goals. But that seems hollow; after all, their intention in doing so was to show the public how political bossism was harming them. In doing so, they would vote the bosses out of power and come into an age of prosperity. That did not happen. A

⁷¹ Curti & Carstensen 558. Adjusted for inflation, \$20,000 is roughly \$500,000 today.

⁷² Howe 165-166.

long-lasting political revolution did not come about. Even so, the effect of the Wisconsin Idea and La Follette did create a revolution. La Follette educated the populace through thousands of speeches and an insistence on the facts. He encouraged people to educate themselves, and the Wisconsin Idea brought the university to make that education accessible. The people flocked to the university, forcing the extension system to grow until it became necessary to open field offices throughout the state. In 1908, Louis Reber, the director of the University Extension System, “called for the establishment of eleven districts with a representative in each district.”⁷³ The first three of these offices opened in Milwaukee, La Crosse, and Oshkosh. Meanwhile, internal struggles over the quality and content of the education offered by the extension system were brewing. Namely, the faculty were divided on how to assign credits to correspondence courses. Ultimately, these debates created “a perceptible movement in the class and course work from noncollegiate to collegiate work, a movement which has continued.”⁷⁴ This movement would eventually culminate with the establishment of the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee⁷⁵, La Crosse⁷⁶, and Oshkosh⁷⁷. Together with Madison⁷⁸, these schools have an active enrollment of roughly 94,000 students. Van Hise said of the university that “it is not even supported for the direct benefit of the students... It is supported that they may become better fitted to serve the state and the nation.”⁷⁹ He steered the University of Wisconsin in that direction, and in doing so expanded its reach farther than he probably expected. And even though the political system he

⁷³ Curti & Carstensen 572.

⁷⁴ Ibid 577.

⁷⁵ “About,” *University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee*. uwm.edu/about/

⁷⁶ “Fast Facts,” *University of Wisconsin- La Crosse*. uwlax.edu/admissions/explore-uw-la-crosse/fast-facts/

⁷⁷ “History of UW Oshkosh,” *University of Wisconsin- Oshkosh*.
uwosh.edu/about-uw-oshkosh/history-of-uw-oshkosh.html

⁷⁸ “Admissions,” *University of Wisconsin- Madison*. wisc.edu/admissions/

⁷⁹ Van Hise.

tried so hard to demolish is still tenaciously clinging to life, one may assume that La Follette would look at his alma mater and its accomplishments with pride.

To put it as bluntly as possible, Wisconsin's progressive movement, as seen through La Follette and the Wisconsin Idea, did not change the fundamental way politics in America worked, but they did affect the way people viewed education. Political bosses in America continue to exist, but it is undeniable that individuals such as George Soros and Sheldon Adelson pour millions of dollars into campaigns for candidates of which they approve. Since the time of La Follette and the Wisconsin Idea, the money spent on any given campaign as continued to grow. These facts completely undermine the effect that activists like La Follette, McCarthy, and Howe tried to produce. Even so, the impact that they had on the educational lives of Wisconsinites is undeniable. The university, and other public education, continue to grow because of it and, with that growth, their dream stays alive. La Follette believed that "evil and corruption thrive best in the dark."⁸⁰ This belief spurred him to cast light on hidden facts, inspiring the citizens of Wisconsin, and its university, to strive for more education. It is this widespread expansion of education that demonstrates the ultimate legacy of La Follette and the Wisconsin Idea.

⁸⁰ La Follette 301.

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