

The Belleville Manifesto and Educating the Peasantry

Leon Gambetta

Leon Gambetta was elected to the French legislature in 1869 based on the radical program of the Belleville Manifesto, which called for the abolition of standing armies, the disestablishment of the church, and freedom of the press, assembly, and of association. Later Gambetta also espoused free elementary education for workers and peasants, as suggested by the second essay. While striving to protect the opponents of Napoleon III's regime, he became one of the leaders of the republican minority. Although he often criticized the foreign policy of Napoleon III, Gambetta remained a devout French patriot. His ideas about voting and education aimed at strengthening the French nation.

The Belleville Manifesto

Citizen Electors—I accept this mandate.

On these conditions I shall be especially proud to represent you because this election will have been conducted in conformity with the true principles of universal suffrage. The electors will have freely chosen their candidate. The electors will have determined the political programme of their delegate. The method seems to me at once right and in line with the traditions of the early days of the French Revolution.

I therefore in my turn adhere freely to the declaration of principles and the rightful claims which you commission me to press at the tribune.

With you, I think that there is no other sovereign but the people, and that universal suffrage, the instrument of this sovereignty, has no value and basis and carries no obligation, unless it is radically free.

The most urgent reform must therefore be to free universal suffrage from every tutelage, every shackle, every pressure, every corruption.

With you, I think that universal suffrage, once made the master, would suffice to sweep away all

the things which your programme demands, and to establish all the freedoms, all the institutions which we are seeking to bring about.

With you, I think that France, the home of indestructible democracy, will know liberty, peace, order, justice, material prosperity and moral greatness only through the triumph of the principles of the French Revolution.

With you, I think that a legal and loyal democracy is the political system *par excellence* which achieves most promptly and certainly the moral and material emancipation of the greatest number, and best ensures social equality in laws, actions and customs.

But—with you also—I consider that the progressive achievement of these reforms depends absolutely on the political regime and on political reforms, and it is for me axiomatic in these matters that the form involves and determines the substance.

It is, furthermore, this sequence and order of priority which our fathers have indicated and fixed in the profound and comprehensive slogan beyond which there is no safety: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. We are thus in mutual agreement. Our contact is completed. I am at once your delegate and your trustee.

I go further than signifying agreement. I give you my vow: I swear obedience to this present contract and fidelity to the Sovereign people.

From: *Democracy in France: the Third and Fourth Republics*, comp. by David Thompson (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 270–271.

Educating the Peasantry

The peasantry is intellectually several centuries behind the enlightened and educated classes in this country. The distance between them and us is immense. We have received a classical or scientific education—even the imperfect one of our day. We have learned to read our history, to speak our language, while (a cruel thing to say) so many of our countrymen can only babble! Ah! that peasant, bound as he is to the tillage of the soil, who bravely carries the burden of his day, with no other consolation than that of leaving to his children the paternal fields, perhaps increased an acre in extent; all his passions, joys, and fears concentrated in the fate of his patrimony. Of the external world, of the society in which he lives, he apprehends only legends and rumors. He is the prey of the cunning and fraudulent. He strikes, without knowing it, the bosom of the revolution, his benefactress; he gives loyally his taxes and his blood to a society for which he feels fear as much as respect. But there his role ends, and if you speak to him of principles, he knows nothing of them.

It is to the peasantry, then, that we must address ourselves. We must raise and instruct them. . . . Enlightened and free peasants who are able to represent themselves. . . . should be a tribute rendered to the progress of the civilization of the masses. This new social force should be utilized for the general welfare.

Unfortunately we have not yet reached that point. Progress will be denied us as long as the French democracy fail to demonstrate that if we would remake our country, if we would bring back her grandeur, her power, and her genius it is of vital interest to her superior classes to elevate and emancipate this people of workers, who hold in reserve a

force still virgin but able to develop inexhaustible treasures of activity and aptitude. We must learn and then teach the peasant what he owes to Society and what he has the right to ask of her.

On the day when it shall be well understood that we have no grander or more pressing work; that we should put aside and postpone all other reforms: that we have but one task—the Instruction of the people, the diffusion of education, the encouragement of science—on that day a great step will have been taken in your regeneration. But our action needs to be a double one, that it may bear upon the body as well as the wind. To be exact, each man should be intelligent, trained not only to think, read, and reason, but made able to act and fight. Everywhere beside the teacher we should place the gymnast and the soldier, to the end that our children, our soldiers, our fellow citizens, may be able to hold a sword, to carry a gun on a long march, to sleep under the canopy of the stars, to support valiantly all the hardships demanded of a patriot. We must push to the front education. Otherwise we only make a success of letters, but do not create a bulwark of patriots. . . .

If it need ten years, if it need twenty years, then we must devote to it ten or twenty years. But we must begin at once, that each year may see the advancing life of a new generation, strong, intelligent, as much in love with science as with the Fatherland, having in their hearts the double sentiment that he serves his country well only when he serves it with his reason and his arm.

We have been educated in a rough school. We must therefore cure ourselves of the vanity which has caused us so many disasters. We must realize conscientiously where our responsibility exists, and, seeing the remedy, sacrifice all to the object to be attained—to remake and reconstitute France! . . .

From: *The World's Famous Orations*. William Jennings Bryan, editor-in-chief, 10 vols. (New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1906), vol. 4, 32–33.