

The Power of Political Integrity/Ethics and Public Opinion

[Excerpt paraphrased from book, “Felix Holt”, written in 1866 by George Eliot]

In my opinion the great question was how to give every human a human's share in life. But I think people expect voting to do more toward it than I do. I want the working people to have power. I'm a workingman myself, and I don't want to be anything else. There are two sorts of power. There's a power to do mischief – to undo what's been done with great expense and labor, to waste and destroy, to be cruel to the weak, to lie and quarrel, and to talk poisonous nonsense. That's the sort of power that ignorant numbers have. It never made a joint stool or planted a potato. Do you think it's likely to do much toward governing a great country, and making wise laws, and giving shelter, food and clothes to millions of people? Ignorant power becomes in the end the same thing as wicked power; it makes misery. It's another sort of power that I want us working people to have, and I can see plainly enough that our all having votes will do little toward it at present. I should like to convince you that votes would never give you political power worth having while things are as they are now, and that if you go the right way to work you may get power sooner without votes. Perhaps all you who read this are sober, people who try to learn as much of the nature of things as they can, and to be as little like fools as possible. A fool or idiot is one who expects things to happen that never can happen; they pour milk into a can without a bottom, and expects the milk to stay there. The more of such vain expectations a person has, the more they are a fool or idiot. If any working person expects a vote to do for them what it never can do, they are foolish to that amount. The way to get rid of vain folly is to get rid of vain expectations, and of thoughts that don't agree with the nature of things. The people who have had true thoughts about water, and what it will do when it is turned into steam and under all sorts of circumstances, have made themselves a great power in the world: they are turning the wheels of engines that will help to change most things. But no engines would have done this, if there had been false notions about the way water would act. Now all the schemes about voting, and districts, and annual legislature, and the rest, are engines, and the water or steam – the force that is to work them – must come out of human nature – out of people's passions, feelings, desires. Whether the engines will do good work or bad depends on these feelings; and if we have false expectations about people's characters, we are very much like the idiot who thinks he'll carry milk in a can without a bottom. The notions about what mere voting will do are very much of that sort. You ask, how do we get the power without the votes? I'll tell you what's the greatest power under heaven and that is public opinion – the ruling belief in society about what is right and what is wrong, what is honorable and what is shameful. That's the steam that is to work the engines. How can political freedom make us better, any more than a religion we don't believe in, if people laugh and turn away when they see men abuse and defile it? While public opinion is what it is – while people have no better beliefs about public duty – while corruption is not felt to be a damning disgrace – while people are not ashamed in government and out of it to make public questions

which concern the welfare of millions a mere screen for their own petty private ends, no fresh scheme of voting will much mend our condition. Suppose out of every hundred who had a vote there were thirty who had some soberness, some sense to choose with, some good feeling to make them wish the right thing for all. Then suppose there were seventy out of the hundred who were, half of them, not sober, who had no sense to choose one thing in politics more than another, and who had so little good feeling in them that they wasted on their own drinking the money that should have helped to feed and clothe their family; and another half of them who, if they didn't drink, were too ignorant and stupid to see any good for themselves better than pocketing a dollar when it was offered to them. Where would be the political power of the thirty sober men? The power would lie with the seventy drunken and stupid votes; and what sort of people would get the power – what sort of people would end by returning whom they pleased to the government? They would be people who would undertake to do the business for a candidate and return him: people who have no real opinions, but who pilfer the words of every opinion, and turn them into hypocritical talk which will serve their purpose at the moment; people who look out for dirty work to make their fortunes by, because dirty work wants little talent and no conscience; people who know all the ins and outs of bribery, because there is not a cranny in their own souls where a bribe cannot enter. Such people as these will be the master wherever there's a majority of voters who care more for money, for drink, more for some mean little end which is their own and nobody else's, than for anything that has ever been called Right in the world. Suppose there is a voter named Jack, who has seven children, and makes minimum wage. Jack is uneducated – What is Jack to do when he sees a smart stranger coming to him, who happens to be just one of these people that I say will be the masters until public opinion gets too hot for them? To remedy this long-standing wrong-doing and suffering is not in the power of any measure, class, or period. It would be childish folly to expect any Reform Bill to possess the magical property whereby a sudden social transformation could be accomplished. On the contrary, abrupt transitions should be shunned as dangerous to order and law. Order and law alone are certain to insure a steady collective progress. The only means to this end consisting in the general spread of education, to secure which, at least for the children, the working people should spare no pains. Without knowledge, no political measures will be of any benefit, ignorance with or without vote always of necessity engendering vice and misery. But, guided by a fuller knowledge, the working classes would be able to discern what sort of men they should choose for their representatives, and instead of electing “platform swaggerers, who bring us nothing but the ocean to make our broth with,” they would confide the chief power to the hands of the truly wise, those who know how to regulate life “according to the truest principles people are in possession of.”