

# THE LEGACY OF THE "WISCONSIN IDEA"

## *Hastening the Demise of an Exhausted Progressivism*

MICHAEL S. JOYCE

**T**he historical concept called the "Wisconsin Idea" had nothing to do with cheese or beer or bratwurst, although those are very fine ideas, too. No, the Wisconsin Idea was that famous package of political and economic reforms introduced in the state shortly after the turn of the century by a statesman sporting a magnificent silver pompadour worthy of Jerry Lee Lewis: namely, "Fighting Bob" LaFollette.

LaFollette's reforms — the direct primary, massive regulation of railroads, the establishment of rules and rates for other major markets through non-partisan boards of experts, the close linkage between the state university and state governance — are familiar to us all. They became the centerpiece of the progressive liberal reform environment, which went on to reshape America's political landscape for the rest of this century. But less familiar is the intellectual giant who stood behind and inspired LaFollette from his days as a college student — the long-time president of the University of Wisconsin, John Bascom.<sup>1</sup>

Assuming the presidency of the University in 1874, Bascom soon became a central figure in the most important intellectu-



Rochelle Weiner

al and political development behind progressivism: *i.e.*, the *delegitimation* of the private, voluntary associations of civil society, alongside the *legitimation* of a powerful, all-embracing political state. This required nothing less than the transfer of moral and spiritual authority away from civil society into the hands of the modern, centralized state.

### **The Kingdom of God on Earth**

For Bascom, this project was rooted in his larger intellectual efforts to reconcile traditional religious faith with the newly discovered science of human evolution, through what he described as the "New Theology." Essentially, Bascom perceived evolution as giving a whole new sense to the concept of the Kingdom of God, the goals of which could now be realized in this world. Just as evolution mandated progressive improvement in the physical qualities of creatures, so it mandated the progressive unfolding of God's will and purposes to man.

*Michael S. Joyce, Ph.D., is president of The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation in Milwaukee. This article is adapted from remarks Dr. Joyce made to the annual meeting of the State Policy Network in Traverse City, Michigan, last year.*

And the means of God's revelation to man was nothing other than modern science, with its ever-expanding stock of factual and rational evolutionary knowledge.

The unity of religious and secular truth, however, could not be realized through what he described as "regressive and reactionary voluntary associations" — the institution of private, civil society. The unified truth of modern science required as its essential instrument the unified power of the political state, in order to bring enlightenment and reform to the human condition.

For Bascom, the moral reformer could no longer rely upon the isolated individual or local community association as the vehicle for the perfection of the community. He needed instead to be master of all the social laws affecting society. Thus the new missionary would act as a secular reformer relying not so much on the skill of the gospel preacher as the expertise of the social scientist; for as the race advanced, intellectual and rational powers would continually supplant emotional ones as the critical vehicles of human progress.

Bascom brought together many of the ideas he had developed at Wisconsin, and he published them during his last year at Madison in a work entitled *Sociology*. The aim of society, he wrote, is "to transfer 'wide and diffuse power' from the hodge podge of voluntary institutions to 'the largest aggregate of power' vested in the state."

Civil society — the vast, pluralistic upwelling of groups possessing boundless civic energy, and so admired by the Founders and Alexis de Tocqueville — appeared instead to Bascom to be a wasteful, chaotic, misguided jumble of amateurish groups meddling unwelcome in social policy. Civic associations, he taught, were stultifying and retrograde. Indeed, civil society was unethical and un-Christian in nature, and ultimately debilitating to society as a whole.

When Bascom therefore called for "harmonious power" as the truest expression of "beneficent power," he turned directly to the state, the agency of public power, for its exercise. The state, Bascom wrote in *Sociology*, must create social power, surpassing the work

of isolated individuals and groups, thus rejecting the legacy of the Founders and replacing their admiration of civil society with a vision of rational, scientific, non-political public administration.

### Civil Society as the "Seat of Sin"

Bascom's reformist ideology found political expression in the cause of Prohibition. In Bascom's view, civil society both nurtured and sanctioned the evils of liquor by adherence to the fallacious doctrine of individual rights. Civil society's misplaced devotion to the individual, he argued, prevented the progressive realization of the kingdom of Heaven on earth. For him, the state must enforce temperance, for it alone is the engine of society's progress. Government has an absolute right to rearrange the drinking habits of citizens because it is the sole legitimate expression of the public good, against which the individual has no rights. Said Bascom: "To affirm the personal rights of an individual ... is to enable him to stand across the path of public progress, to check the organic movement of society .... Society is under no obligation to subject ... its own high fortunes to those morally ignorant and repellent." It must "overrule unreason with reason, unrighteousness with righteousness."

State-enforced prohibition thus illustrates Bascom's larger moral apotheosis of political power. As he noted in his 1876 baccalaureate address, civil society was hopelessly the "seat of sin." The state, by apparent contrast, must become the seat of virtue. "The state like the individual has the duty to be righteous," he noted. "It has the right and the duty to push to completion its own organization; to do all it can for its own highest attainments in itself and its citizens."

As Bascom looked to the enlarged influence of the state for the promotion of moral power in modern society, so he assigned increasing prominence to the place and function of the public university, where the new, unified, evolving modern sciences of society were explored, developed, and passed on to the students who would soon have the

levers of the state in their hands.

By the university, of course, he meant the reformed, politically progressive institutions of the state, not the small, sectarian schools — the old-time colleges — where antiquated, retrograde, fragmented moral teachings continued to prevail.

In a baccalaureate address in 1877, Bascom complained that the small colleges, because of their wide diffusion and divided purposes and efforts, deprived the state — especially a state like Wisconsin — of the unified public purpose it needed. Religious and ethnic diversity was harmful because it left society to depend on a “rambling halting voluntarism.” Thus Bascom urged on Wisconsinites the example of Michigan, with its large, successful university and relatively few denominational schools. By contrast, he noted, Wisconsin resembled too much the condition of Ohio, which suffered from small schools in profusion, and the ensuing tragic dispersion of public power.

The “Wisconsin Idea” was put forth as an example to other reformers of how to achieve authentic democracy. Elected representatives had a role to play, but the real architects of legislation were the academic experts. As one observer put it, “The close intimacy of the University with public affairs explains the democracy, the thoroughness, and the scientific accuracy of the state in its legislation. It, as much as any other influence, kept Wisconsin true to the progressive movement.”<sup>2</sup>

Reflecting on his years as a student at Madison, LaFollette recalled the influence John Bascom’s teaching had upon his own political thought: “He was forever telling us what the state was doing for us and urging our return obligation not ... for our own selfish benefit, but to return some service to the state.

The graduates of the state university must be the intellectual vanguard of the state; they must supply the ideas that will bring about the just state and inaugurate the new area of collective power.”

Now, Bascom and others believed that a vast network of public educational institutions would have to be developed throughout the state to echo the political doctrines of the university, and to prepare pre-collegiate students for their university studies. Thus did the progressives turn their attention to the public-education system in general, with fateful consequences for us today.

### **“Experts” Acting “Above Politics”**

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The progressives claimed that the education system at the turn of the century had fallen into the hands of an entrenched, corrupt, highly partisan, boss-run establishment, which put protecting privilege above the task of educating children. A key solution, according to our progressive forbears, was to shield education from crass political influence by establishing separate, non-

partisan bodies for finance and personnel selection. Accountability now ran upward, through layers of administrative bureaucrats, to a handful of elected officials who made policy on the basis of objective, non-partisan sciences of society taught in the university. This way, it was argued, democratic self-rule would be protected from the corruptions and distortions of powerful interest groups.

In time, the public school would become virtually synonymous with progressive democracy, its managers proudly claiming to be “above politics.” However well-intentioned the progressives may have been, though, it’s apparent that their theory hasn’t turned out so well in practice. Putting it bluntly, public education today is once again

in the hands of an entrenched, corrupt, highly politicized, boss-run establishment, which puts protecting its privileges above the task of educating our children.

Powerful special interests — well-financed teacher unions, insulated education bureaucrats, and the politicians that do their bidding — team up to ensure that no significant changes are brought to a system that is, without question, failing to educate our children, or even to keep them in school. Curriculum is designed with highly charged political aims in mind, reflecting everything from environmental extremism to virulent feminism to racial separatism to a radical skepticism about moral and spiritual truths — though it's always hard to pin down the latest educational fad or fancy.

Today, the path of neo-progressive reform is once again to challenge head-on the powerful special interests who manipulate and distort our children's education. This time, however, let's rethink what democratic accountability demands. Our historical experience with progressivism teaches us that you cannot protect "the people" from the interests by turning over decisions to supposedly apolitical bureaucrats and experts — by "depoliticizing" education. Bureaucrats and experts inevitably *become* the special interests.

For the fact of the matter is that setting educational policy is always and everywhere a profoundly political matter. In the everyday sense, education policy is a critical part of governing and so attracts the attention of political interests. In the highest sense, education policy allows a self-governing people to determine what skills, moral values, and political commitments it will pass on to the next generation. It's our way of defining just what kind of people we are or would like to be, as we strive to live up to our most cherished political ideals. (No one understands that better than the education establishment, which will struggle fiercely to preserve its august role as definer of our political character, even as it fervently claims to be "above politics.")

But if education policy is finally and irrevocably political, then surely, in a self-

governing polity, the people themselves are the source of educational policy — not a distant bureaucracy. Truly democratic lines of accountability would not run upward, to some isolated, centralized body of "experts," but downward, to our citizens. Today, a genuinely accountable educational system would answer the widespread demand for schools that offer more rigorous discipline, more emphasis on moral values like self-discipline and personal responsibility, a tighter focus on fundamental skills and aptitudes, and greater parental involvement.

Above all, a system accountable to citizens would respond to parental demand for more choice in education — the right to choose any school they deem best for their children, using their own tax dollars to pay for it, regardless of whether that school is managed by government bureaucrats or not.

### Citizens Acting Beyond Politics

To put it bluntly, progressivism as a political, social, and economic doctrine is exhausted. Institutional manifestations of progressivism survive and will probably do so for the immediate future. Nevertheless, progressivism is a lost cause intellectually. Entrenched bureaucrats and interest groups with a stake in its preservation may act as if progressivism can be saved by reform, but in fact it is destined for the dustbin of history, along with its more radically collectivist cousins.

In light of this, our common project must be to hasten the demise of progressivism. To my mind, the most effective way to accomplish this is by reviving the older, more traditional and more encompassing view of citizenship — not citizen as mere voter, but citizen as active participant in the vast network of voluntary institutions that brought so much aggravation to John Bascom: namely, civil society.

What sorts of measures will be required if we are to hasten the demise of progressivism's legacy and to revitalize civil society?

First, we must be prepared once again to treat Americans as genuinely self-governing

citizens, willing and able to reassume control of their daily lives and to make critical choices for themselves. Americans must not be dismissed as helpless victims or passive clients.

**Second**, we must seek to restore the intellectual and cultural legitimacy of citizenly common sense as a way of understanding and solving problems. This suggests an effort to re-establish the dignity of traditional folk wisdom and everyday morality, with renewed emphasis on teaching and nurturing personal character — the customary guidepost of everyday life. This will mean taking on intellectually the radical skepticism about such “unscientific” approaches propagated by professional pseudo-scientists eager to preserve their intellectual hegemony.

**Third**, we must reinvigorate and re-empower the traditional, local institutions — families, schools, churches, neighborhoods — that provide training in and room for the exercise of genuine citizenship, that pass on folk wisdom and everyday morality to the next generation, and that cultivate and reinforce personal character. This will require efforts to reform such local institutions, for often today’s churches, schools, and related “mediating structures” have themselves succumbed to the view that Americans are mere clients or consumers of therapeutic social services.

**Fourth**, we must encourage the dramatic decentralization of power and accountability away from the centralized, bureaucratic “Nanny state” in Washington, back to the states, localities, and revitalized “mediating structures.” We should also strive to refocus moral authority back to such structures and away from corrupt intellectual and cultural elites in the universities, the media, and elsewhere, who regard traditional mediating structures as benighted purveyors of reactionary prejudices.

**Finally**, we must be willing to chal-

lenge on all fronts the political hegemony of the “helping” and “caring” professionals and bureaucrats who have penetrated so many aspects of our daily lives, and who profit so handsomely from the Nanny state. We will need to dramatize their status as entrenched, corrupt special interests, more concerned about advancing narrow ideological agendas and protecting political prerogatives than about serving the public.

### Opening Shots in the Resistance Movement

What are the chances of successfully revitalizing civil society through the new citizenship? It is easy to be pessimistic. After all, the entire weight of the modern project as formulated by Bascom and his intellectual comrades seems to be behind the destruction of the independent civil realm.

Nevertheless, I am sanguine about our prospects. Tocqueville himself, after all, was not unacquainted with the destructive effects that modernity would have on civil institutions. Indeed, his purpose in writing *Democracy in America* was precisely to

warn mankind about the impending storm of modernity — to tell us that the old, established institutions of civil society would soon be borne away by the cyclonic winds of modern individualism and the centralized state.

In America, however, he witnessed the remarkable spectacle of hitherto-unrelated individuals — complete strangers — coming together to form wholly new forms of civil institutions in the very teeth of the modern storm. The impulse toward civil association — yearning for genuine citizenship within civil society — is not so easy to destroy, he seemed to suggest.

World events of the past decade only confirm Tocqueville’s hopefulness. No movement ever undertook the eradication of civil

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society with more zeal or determination than Marxism, that totalitarian perversion of the modern project. And yet beneath the seemingly smoothly humming state bureaucracies of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, there sprouted once again the seeds of civil society — churches, civic associations, unions, dissident groups, free presses. Even as the resolve of the Free World halted Marxism's outward thrust, so from within, Marxism began to decay and crumble, as the nascent institutions of civil society flourished and spread. The liberation of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union soon made it apparent that modernity's "final offensive" against civil society had failed utterly.

I believe we can see the same sort of liberation movement taking shape in America at this very moment. In the New York borough of Queens not long ago, a group of parents rose in revolt against the so-called "Rainbow Curriculum," which would have exposed their children to teachings about human sexuality that offended their deepest ethical and religious beliefs. The revolt spread like wildfire, toppling the superintendent of the city's schools and dominating the next elections for the local school boards.

I maintain that these were but the opening shots in a parents' resistance movement that will soon sweep the nation, proving to be every bit as powerful as the civil movements that cut the ground from beneath Soviet Marxism. For while we are willing to put up with an enormous amount of abuse from the state in our own, personal lives, it is a different matter when the state reaches for the minds and spirits of our children. Then the rallying cry becomes, simply: "Not with my children, you don't."

This parents' revolt is beginning to take on a definitive shape nationally. A group of young political activists who had been

instrumental in last decade's supply-side economic revolution has decided that the parents' revolt of the '90s is the political equivalent of the taxpayers' revolt of the '80s. Their objective is to introduce amendments to state constitutions throughout the nation stating simply: "The right of parents to direct the upbringing and education of their children shall not be infringed."

This is a powerful and necessary reassertion of the parental prerogative against the intrusive ministrations of the Nanny state. You may hear more about it shortly. For these activists are looking even now for promising states upon which to focus their initial efforts — states that have traditions of progressive, citizen-based politics; states where parents are refusing to turn over more funds to failures like the public-education establishment; states where parents are clamoring instead for the opportunity to select their own schools for their children. You may be sure that Wisconsin fits that bill nicely.

At any rate, I believe we can take heart both from these developments and from Tocqueville's hopeful teachings, as we undertake here in the United States the revitalization of civil society through the new citizenship. There can be no more urgent task than the resuscitation of the civic sphere, which alone makes genuine citizenship possible.

#### NOTES

1 The author wishes to express his gratitude to J. David Hoeveler, Jr., Professor of History, The University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. The material cited on John Bascom in this article has been liberally quoted from Professor Hoeveler's splendid essay, "The University and the Social Gospel: The Intellectual Origins of the 'Wisconsin Idea,'" *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Volume 59, Number 4 (Summer 1976), p. 282.

2 Frederic Howe, *Wisconsin: An Experiment in Democracy* (New York, N.Y.: C. Scribner's Sons, 1912), at p. 30.

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