Chapter VII

WILSON AS GOVERNOR
The practical test of Woodrow Wilson's ideas on government came when he served as Governor of New Jersey and President of the United States. Though the immediate problems of administration gave him little time to concern himself with academic political philosophy, Wilson's actions as chief executive were clearly directed by his earlier thinking on the nature and role of government.

Wilson's term as Governor is significant in several respects. First of all, the social legislation he proposed illustrates his attempt to create the just balance in society which was the theme of much of his earlier writing. His election reform measures were an attempt to ensure popular control of the government, which he had long advocated. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Wilson's governorship, however, is the vigorous personal leadership he exercised in bringing about the reforms he supported. In asserting his leadership of both the party and the legislature, he often stepped outside the traditional limits of the Governor's role, and sometimes he encountered strong opposition. By the end of his term, however, he had successfully established his
leadership of the Democratic party in New Jersey and had exercised the strong executive leadership which he was to continue as President of the United States. No attempt will be made in the present work to describe or discuss his activities or record as a Governor. These are dealt with in other works, most notably in Arthur S. Link's, Wilson: The Road to the White House.

The first test of Wilson's party leadership came in a battle for the nomination of the candidate for United States Senator from New Jersey. For the first time since 1892, the Democrats had gained control of the legislature. Traditionally, it was the party's jurisdiction to control senatorial nominations and not the Governor's province. On the assumption that he was the party leader, however, Wilson desired to assert his authority in the selection of this United States Senator. Thus, he came into direct conflict with the party machine and the party boss, ex-Senator James Smith. According to the old order, the party boss had a right to organize the legislature, appoint committees, issue orders and control the executive and the legislature—practices Wilson had strongly denounced as corrupt and unworthy of free people.

Since the party voters had expressed their preference for James E. Martino as United States Senator, Wilson demanded that Smith withdraw his candidacy. If he did not do so, Wilson declared that as party leader he would oppose Smith's
election to the Senate. To gain party support for Lartine's candidacy, Wilson invited the Democratic members of the legislature to the Governor's House for a discussion of the question. He strongly reminded them of their pledges to fight corruption. If they continued to support Smith, he declared, he could take the issue directly to the public. The outcome of Wilson's efforts was the nomination and election of J. E. Lartine. Less tangible, but more important was the part this contest played in establishing Wilson's leadership of the Democratic party in New Jersey.

Even before taking office as Governor, Wilson took the initiative in formulating his legislative programme. On 11 January 1911 he wrote to the leading progressive editors and politicians of the State, inviting them to a conference "of a few gentlemen particularly interested in formulating bills for consideration of the Legislature before my actual entrance upon my office as Governor." (1) The conference was held at the Hotel Martinique in New York on 16 January, the eve of his inauguration. (2) It was attended by representatives from both parties and the official Democratic leaders and insurgents who were actively fighting political corruption. (3)


(2) Ibid.

(3) Ibid.
Headlines on 19 January called the meeting a "secret conference." Wilson, however, had had no intention of keeping the fact that the meeting had taken place a secret. That he had invited John J. Matthews, Democratic Assembly floor leader, and a follower of Boss Smith, was an indication that he had no intention of keeping the conference secret. Link observes that an invitation to John J. Matthews had precluded all chances of keeping the meeting a secret. (4) Wilson had hoped, however, that everyone would 'respect the fact that it was purely a private and confidential gathering.' (5)

The result of the conference was to be a series of legislative programmes introduced by different members of the group who had been assigned to draft bills on particular subjects. For example, to G. L. Record, Wilson assigned the task of writing the direct primary and corrupt practices bills. Thus, this conference, though neither a ministry, nor a cabinet, served the same purpose.

In his inaugural address Wilson presented to the public the legislative programme he had worked out with the leaders in his informal conference. (6) Each measure he supported indicated his concern for protecting individual rights against

(4) Ibid., 240.
(5) Ibid.
(6) Ibid., 242.
corporate power. Discussing the need for labour legislation, he declared that relations between employer and employee were 'wholly antiquated and impossible.' '... the state,' he said, 'must have a workmen's compensation law' which will enable the workers to fight for their rights against powerful employer groups. (7) Another fundamental problem, he pointed out, was effective state regulation of corporations; a complete revision of the state's corporation code was necessary to prevent industrial and corporate abuses and to make the corporations serve the public.

The major topic of the inaugural speech, however, was primary and general election reform. Wilson urged adoption of the direct primary system and laws to curb corrupt election procedures. These measures, he believed, would 'bring government back to the people and ... protect it from the control of the representatives of selfish and special interests.' (8)

Since Wilson believed he should insist only on important measures, he concentrated on those measures he had advocated in his campaign, leaving the rest of the legislation to the initiative of other legislative members. (9) This very

(7) Ibid.
(8) Ibid., 242-3.
(9) Ibid., 245-6.
technique of only interfering in those measures he considered most important thus served to ensure his executive leadership.

Though Wilson backed all his major proposals with public speeches, perhaps his actions in support of election reform offer the best illustration of his methods of leadership. Wilson entrusted the task of introducing the election reform measure to Elmer H. Geran. However, he did not cease to exercise direct personal leadership in order to gain support for his legislative programme and openly proclaimed his determination to fight the bosses who were trying to defeat the programme. He explained in detail the provisions of the Geran bill which was intended to eliminate illegal practices in voting. He stated:

I am for that with every ounce of force there is in me; and the challenge that I issue is this: Let no man oppose this thing unless he is willing to oppose it in public and for reasons. (10)

Because critics had accused him of attempting to dominate the legislature, he added:

I want you to understand, gentlemen, that, as your representative, as the only representative of the whole State, for such is the Governor, I am not trying to run the legislature at Trenton. . . . I know a majority of the members of that Legislature pretty well and I respect them thoroughly, and let me tell you that those men are going to act upon their consciences and cannot be run by anybody. (11)
On 6 March Wilson met the full Democratic caucus for the first time. The Geran bill was discussed, and Wilson presented his views. Though there was opposition the Democrats agreed to support the measure and the rest of Wilson's programme as party policy. (12) Wilson's presence at the caucus was unusual in the history of New Jersey politics. Political observers noted that it was the first time in the state's history that a governor had undertaken... personal leadership of the members of his party in the legislature. (13) Wilson continually kept public opinion alert on the Geran bill, in order to counteract the attempt of the local bosses to defeat the measure. He asserted that it was time to reconstitute the government 'by putting it upon its right basis again, which is the basis of the popular will and not the basis of private arrangement.' He assailed those who were opposing the bill 'because of the effect the changes may have upon their bank account.' (14)

Major agreement on the measure was reached at a caucus meeting of the Governor and the Democratic Assemblymen on 13 March. This caucus had been called by the Democratic leaders in the House, but Wilson had announced that he would

(12) Ibid., 249.
(13) Ibid., 249-50.
(14) Ibid., 248-9.
attend it. There were protests and a great deal of talk about preserving the separation of powers. When the constitutionality of his presence in the meeting was questioned, Wilson answered by reading section 6, article 5 of the state constitution:

...he [the governor] shall communicate by message to the legislature at the opening of each session, and at such other times as he may deem necessary, the condition of the State, and recommend such measures as he may deem expedient. (15)

Wilson then made a plea for the Goran bill, threatening to carry the fight to the people if necessary. The impact of Wilson's speech was attested by one assemblyman:

I have never known anything like that speech. ... The Governor talked for at least an hour. ... And the whole thing was merely an appeal to our better unselfish natures. The State had trusted us, as Democrats, with great duties and responsibilities. Would we betray the people or would we seize this splendid opportunity? ... We all came out of that room with one conviction; that we had heard the most wonderful speech of our lives, ... When we went into that caucus we had no assurance as to what the result would be. But opposition melted away under the Governor's influence. That caucus settled the fate of the Goran bill, as well as the whole Democratic program. (16)

Out of the 38 men who attended the caucus, 27 voted to support the Goran bill which eventually was enacted in April.

All three of the measures that Wilson had supported in his inaugural address were enacted by the legislature. In a

(15) Ibid., 253.
(16) Ibid., 255. Footnote.
letter to Mrs. Mary Hulbert, a personal friend, he frankly and accurately assessed his role in the legislature's accomplishment:

The Legislature adjourned yesterday morning at three o'clock, with its work done, I got absolutely everything I strove for,—and more besides. ... Everyone, the papers included, are [sic.] saying that none of it could have been done, if it had not been for my influence and tact and hold upon the people. But that as it may, the thing was done, and the result was as complete a victory as has ever been won, I venture to say, in the history of the country. I wrote the platform, I had the measures formulated to my mind, I kept the pressure of opinion constantly on the legislature, and the programme was carried out to its last detail. This with the senatorial business seems, in the minds of the people looking on little less than a miracle, in the light of what has been the history of reform hitherto in this State. As a matter of fact, it is just a bit of natural history. I came to the office in the fulness of time, when opinion was ripe on all these matters, when both parties were committed to these reforms, and by merely standing fast, and by never losing sight of the business for an hour, but keeping up all sorts of (legitimate) pressure all the time, kept the mighty forces from being diverted or blocked at any point. The strain has been immense, but the reward is great. I feel a great reaction to-day, for I am, of course, exceedingly tired, but I am quietly and deeply happy that I should have been of just the kind of service I wished to be to those who elected and trusted me. (17)

This letter is especially interesting because it demonstrates that Wilson still conceived of the process of political change as he had outlined it in his academic years. Social and political conditions in New Jersey, he saw, had reached the

point where people were ready for reform. But reform would not occur spontaneously; his leadership was necessary to keep the pressure of public opinion constantly on the legislature so that public sentiment would be formulated into law.

As Wilson had intended, his approach was actually that of a prime minister in the state, not in an official but a party sense. He prepared the legislative programme, he explained to the public the need for certain reforms, he convinced the Democratic legislators that quick action was a necessity, and finally brought recalcitrant members of the legislature into the party line by using the party caucus to determine party policies.

We may bring this chapter to a close by briefly describing the views of Wilson on an issue that is of interest to every Governor of a state and every United States President, namely, the relationship of the state to the federal government.

It was Wilson's opinion that the relation of the state to the federal government was the cardinal question of the American constitutional system. He felt that it was not a question that could ever receive a final answer because it involved the growth of the nation. And, "... every successive stage of our political and economic development gives it a new aspect, makes it a new question." (18)

Because "Wilson believed that the relation of the state to the federal government was a question that lay at the heart of the American constitutional system, he felt that the "whole structure and operation of . . . the American government would be altered if it were decided wrongly." Hence, he never wanted party passion to touch and distort this problem. "A sobering sense of responsibility should fall upon everyone who handles it . . . Every man should seek to think of it and to speak of it in the true spirit of the founders of the government." (19)

In Wilson's opinion what were the powers of the states and what were the powers of the federal government? Wilson felt that, generally speaking, the principle of the division of powers was very simple. "It is that the Legislature of the States shall have control of all the general subject — matter of law, of private rights of every kind, of local interest and of everything that directly concerns their people as communities, — free choice with regard to all matters of local regulation and development, and that Congress shall have control only of such matters as concern the peace and the commerce of the country as a whole." (20)

(19) Ibid., 33.
(20) Ibid., 34.
In Wilson's opinion, the very distinguishing feature of the American political system was the fact that its government was essentially local. Wilson felt this was only a natural result of the manner in which the nation developed. "It has come to maturity by the stimulation of no central force or guidance, but by the abounding self-helping, self-sufficing energy of its parts, which severally brought themselves into existence and added themselves to the Union, pleasing first of all themselves in the framing of their laws and constitutions, not asking leave to exist, but existing first and asking leave afterwards, self-originated, self-constituted, self-confident, self-sustaining, veritable communities, demanding only recognition." (21) Wilson felt that it was this localness — this spontaneity, variety and independence of the various communities of the country which made the American political system such an admirable instrument of "vital constitutional understanding." (22) In fact, Wilson believed that the question of states rights was not basically "a question of sovereignty or of any other political abstraction; it is a question of vitality." (23) Its localness gave it spontaneity and elasticity and "... preserved it from the paralysis which

(21) Ibid., 40.
(22) Ibid.
(23) Ibid., 37.
has sooner or later fallen upon every people who have looked to their central government to patronize and nurture them." (24)

In Wilson's opinion, the constitution made a natural division between the state and federal powers; at the same time both were the immediate governments of the people. The federal government did not govern the states but acted directly upon the individuals just as did the state government. It "... is the immediate and familiar instrument of the people in everything that it undertakes as if there were no states." (25)

Wilson considered this immediateness to the people of all aspects of government the key to its vitality and success.

Wilson was a commanding Governor. He came to his position with the knowledge of a perceptive student of politics. His desire had always been to fill a position of leadership in which he could be of some public service. He had prepared himself for this task. Thus, he entered the Governorship with the farsighted programme of an up-to-date liberal political mind; and with a very definite view as to his place as Governor in the execution of his programme. That he was most successful is due as much to his self-training and personality as to the times. Fortunately his thoughts were also the thoughts of the public. The evils he saw in politics were the evils seen also by the public. A commanding personality entered a governorship with

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(24) Ibid., 40;
(25) Ibid., 42.
ideas that corresponded with those of the forward-looking peoples of his state. The combination could not but be successful.

The democratic party was looking for a leader—a popular liberal figure. Wilson had become well-known for his writings on government; as a university president with ideas; and, as a strong forward moving governor who had with ease and dignity become the leader of his party. Such a man would seem an ideal candidate for President and such were the thoughts of the national party leaders; and thus Wilson's youthful dreams to lead were fulfilled and he came to the highest office of leadership in his country—the Presidency.