Who is a Progressive?

***Theodore Roosevelt***

**Louisville, Kentucky**

**April 1912**

In his recent speech at Philadelphia President Taft stated that he was a Progressive, and this raises the question as to what a Progressive is. More is involved than any man’s say-so as to himself.

A well-meaning man may vaguely think of himself as a Progressive without having even the faintest conception of what a Progressive is. Both vision and intensity of conviction must go to the make-up of any man who is to lead the forward movement, and mildly good intentions are utterly useless as substitutes.

The essential difference, as old as civilized history, is between the men who, with fervor and broad sympathy and imagination, stand for the forward movement, the men who stand for the uplift and betterment of mankind, and who have faith in the people, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, the men of narrow vision and small sympathy, who are not stirred by the wrongs of others. With these latter stand also those other men who distrust the people, and many of whom not merely distrust the people, but wish to keep them helpless so as to exploit them for their own benefit.

The difference has never been more accurately set forth than in a lecture by the great English writer, Mr. J.A. Froude, delivered some forty-five years ago, and running as follows:

“Two kinds of men… appear as leaders in time of change. … On one side there are the… men who have no confidence in the people—who have no passionate convictions—men who believe that all wholesome reforms proceed downward from the educated to the multitudes; who regard with contempt, qualified by terror, appeals to the popular conscience or to popular intelligence.

Opposite to these are the men of faith—and by faith I do not mean belief in dogmas, but belief in goodness, belief in justice, in righteousness.… They are not contented with looking for what may be useful or pleasant to themselves; they look by quite other methods for what is honorable, for what is good, for what is just. They believe that if they can find out that, then all hazards, in spite of all present consequences to themselves, that is to be preferred?

When the air is heavy with impostors, and men live only to make money,… and the kingdom of heaven is bought and sold, and all that is high and pure in man is smothered by corruption, fire of the same kind bursts out in higher natures with a fierceness which cannot be controlled; and confident in truth and right, they call fearlessly on the seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal to rise and stand by them.

They do not ask whether those whom they address have wide knowledge of history or science or philosophy; they ask rather that they shall be honest, that they shall be brave.… They know well that conscience is no exceptional privilege of the great or the cultivated, that to be generous and unselfish is no prerogative of rank or intellect. ”

We of to-day who stand for the Progressive movement here in the United States are not wedded to any particular kind of machinery, save solely as means to the end desired. Our aim is to secure the real and not the nominal rule of the people. With this purpose in view, we propose to do away with whatever in our government tends to secure to privilege, and to the great sinister special interests, a rampart from behind which they can beat back the forces that strive for social and industrial justice, and frustrate the will of the people.

For this purpose we believe in securing for the people the direct election of United States Senators, exactly as the people have already secured in actual practice the direct election of the President. We believe in securing for the people the right of nominating candidates for office, from the President down, by direct primaries, because the convention system, good in its day, has been twisted from its purpose, so that the delegates to the conventions, when chosen under the present methods by pressure of money and patronage, often deliberately misrepresent instead of representing the popular will. We believe in securing to the people the exercise of a real and not merely a nominal control over their representatives in office, this control to include the power to secure the enactment of laws which the people demand, and the rejection of laws to which the people are opposed, if, after due effort, it is found impossible to get from the Legislature and the courts a real representation of the deliberate popular judgment in these matters.

But these and kindred measures are merely machinery, and each community must judge for itself as to the machinery which its needs make necessary. The object, however, must be the same everywhere; that is, to give the people real control, and to have the people exercise this control in a spirit of the broadest sympathy and broadest desire to secure social and industrial justice for every man and woman, so that the work of all of us may be done and the lives of all of us lived under conditions which will tend to increase the dignity, the worth, and the efficiency of each individual.

If in any State the courts, in addition to doing justice in the ordinary cases between man and man, have striven to help and not hamper the people in their efforts to secure social and industrial justice in a far broader sense for the people as a whole, then in that community there may be no need for change as regards them. But where, in any community, as in my own State of New York, for instance, the highest court of the State, because of its adherence to outworn, to dead and gone systems of philosophy, and its lack of understanding of and sympathy with the living, the vital needs of those in the community whose needs are greatest, becomes a bulwark of privilege and the most effective of all means for preventing the people from working in efficient fashion for true justice, then I hold that the power, after due deliberation and in Constitutional fashion, to have their judgment made efficient and their interpretation of the Constitution made binding upon their servants the judges no less than upon their servants the legislators and executives?

Every man who fights fearlessly and effectively against special privilege in any form is to that extent a Progressive. Every man who, directly or indirectly, upholds privilege and favors the special interests, whether he acts from evil motives or merely because he is puzzle-headed or dull of mental vision or lacking in social sympathy, or whether he simply lacks interest in the subject, is a reactionary.

Every man is to that extent a Progressive if he stands for any form of social justice, whether it securing proper protection for factory girls against dangerous machinery, for securing a proper limitation of hours of labor for women and children in industry, for securing proper living conditions for those who dwell in the thickly crowded regions of our great cities, for helping, so far as legislators can help, all the conditions of work and life for wage-workers in great centers of industry, or for helping by the action both of the National and State governments, so far as conditions will permit, the men and women who dwell in the open country to increase their efficiency both in production on their farms and in business arrangements for the marketing of their produce, and also to increase the opportunities to give the best possible expression to their social life. The man is a reactionary, whatever may be his professions and no matter how excellent his intentions, who opposes these movements, or who, if in high place, takes no interest in them and does not earnestly lead them forward.

When, in deference to the reactionaries in Congress, the President put a stop to the work of the Country Life Commission, so that for three years the National Government has done little but mark time, or indeed to step backward, as regards this movement, then, no matter how good his intentions, his actions ranged him against the Progressive side. When the President supports those courts which declare that the people have no power to do social justice by enacting laws such as those I have above outlined, and when he opposes the effort to give to the sober judgment of the people due effect, as against the decisions of a reactionary court, then he shows himself a reactionary.

When the President characterizes a moderate proposal to render effective the sober judgment of the American people, as against indefensible and reactionary court decisions in favor of the privileged classes, as “laying the ax at the foot of the tree of well-ordered freedom,” then the President is standing against the sane and moderate movement for social justice; he is standing in favor of privilege; and he thereby ranks himself against the Progressives, against the cause of justice for the helpless and the wronged, and on the side of the reactionaries, on the side of the beneficiaries of privilege and injustice.

Four years ago the Progressives supported Mr. Taft for President, and he was opposed by such representatives of special privilege as Mr. Penrose of Pennsylvania, Mr. Aldrich of Rhode Island, Mr. Gallinger of New Hampshire, and Messrs. Lorimer, Cannon, and McKinley of Illinois; and he was opposed by practically all the men of the stamp of Messrs. Guggenheim and Evans in Colorado, Mr. Cox in Ohio, and Mr. Patrick Calhoun of San Francisco. These men were not progressives then, and they do not pretend to be Progressives now. But, unlike the President, they know who is a Progressive and who is not. They know that he is not a Progressive. Their judgment in this matter is good. After three and a half years of association with and knowledge of the President, these and their fellows are now the President’s chief supporters; and they and the men who feel and act as they do in business and in politics give him the great bulk of his strength. The President says that he is a Progressive. These men know him well and have studied his actions for three years, and they regard him as being precisely the kind of Progressive whom they approve—that is, as not a Progressive at all.

Now, the progressiveness that meets and merits the cordial approval of these gentlemen is not the kind of progressiveness which we on our side champion. However good the President’s intentions, I believe that his actions have shown that he is entitled to the support of precisely these men. Take the most important bit of legislation enacted by the last Republican Congress—the Rate Bill. When this bill was submitted by the Administration, it was a thoroughly mischievous measure, which would have undone the good work that has been accomplished in the control of the great railways during the last twenty years. In that shape it was reported out of the Senate committee by its ardent champion, Senator Aldrich. In that shape it was championed by all those gentlemen whom I have mentioned who had it in their power to give such support.

But the Progressives in the Senate amended the bill, against the determined opposition of the reactionary friends of the Administration. They made it a good bill by striking out the chief features of the bill as the reactionaries framed it. They made but one mistake. They left in the bill the provision for a Commerce Court; and in its actual workings this feature of the bill has proved thoroughly mischievous, and should be repealed.

The gentlemen in question and their allies cordially approve the administration of the Pure Food and Drugs Bill during the last three years, which has resulted in Dr. Wiley’s resigning, because, as he says in print, the situation has become intolerable, and “the fundamental principles of the Food and Drugs Act had one by one been paralyzed and discredited.” He specifically mentioned among the interests engaged in the manufacture of misbranded or adulterated foods which had escaped from the control of the Bureau the interests engaged in “the manufacture of so-called whisky from alcohol, colors, and flavors.” The gentlemen I have named and the great interests back of them, and their allies, like- Mr. Tawney, of Minnesota, were responsible for the President’s abandoning the Country Life and Conservation Commissions, which had cost the Government nothing and had rendered invaluable service to the country; and they also cordially approved the nomination of Mr. Ballinger to the position of Secretary of the Interior.

For two years the Administration did everything in its power to undo the most valuable work that had been done in Conservation, especially in securing to the people the right to regulate water power franchise in the public interest. This effort became so flagrant and the criticism so universal that it was finally abandoned even by the Administration itself. As for the efforts to secure social justice in industrial matters, by securing child labor legislation, for instance, the Administration simply abandoned them completely.

Alike in its action and in its inaction, the conduct of the Administration during the last three years has been such as to merit the support and approval of Messrs. Aldrich, Gallinger, Penrose, Lorimer, Cox, Guggenheim, and the other gentlemen I have mentioned. I do not wonder that they support it, but I do not regard an Administration which has merited and which receives such support as being entitled and to call itself Progressive, no matter with what elasticity the word may be stretched.

No men have been closer or more interested students of the career of President Taft than these men, no men better understand its real significance, no men better appreciate what the effect of the continuance of this Administration for another four years would mean. I believe that their judgment upon the Administration and upon what its continuance would mean to the people can be accepted, and I think that their judgment, as shown by the extreme recklessness of their actions in trying to secure the President’s renomination, gives us an accurate gauge as to what the Administration merits from the people, and what the action of the people should be.

There is no question that in many States these gentlemen and those now allied with them are well aware that the majority of the people are against them, but they have set themselves to work by hook or by crook to overcome that majority. Under ordinary circumstances, in an ordinary political contest among politicians of substantially the same stamp, they would undoubtedly prefer to follow the majority of the people. They do not do so in this instance because they realize fully that the interests they champion are antagonistic to the interest of the people, and that on this occasion the line-up is clean-cut between the people on one side, and on the other the political bosses and all who represent special privilege and the evil alliance of big business with politics.

The Republican party is now facing a great crisis. It is to decide whether it will be, as in the days of Lincoln, the party of the plain people, the party of progress, the party of social and industrial justice; or whether it will be the party of privilege and of special interests, the heir to those who were Lincoln’s most bitter opponents, the party that represents the great interests within and with out Wall Street which desire through their control over the servants of the pubic to be kept immune from punishment when they do wrong and to be given privileges to which they are not entitled.

The big business concern that is both honest and far-sighted will, I believe, in the end favor our effort to secure thorough-going supervision and control over industrial big business, just as we have now secured it over the business of inter-State transportation and the business of banking under the National law. We do not propose to do injustice to any man, but we do propose adequately to guarantee the people against injustice by the mighty corporations which make up the predominant and characteristic feature of modern industrial life.

Prosperity can permanently come to this country only on a basis of honesty and of fair treatment for all. Those men of enormous wealth who bitterly oppose every species of effective control by the people, through their Governmental agents, over the business use of that wealth are, I verily believe, most short-sighted as to their own ultimate interests. They should welcome such effort, they should welcome every effort to make them observe and to assist them in observing the law, so that their activities shall be helpful and not harmful to the American people. Most surely if the wise and moderate control we advocate does not come, then some day these men or their descendants will have to face the chance of some movement of really dangerous and drastic character being direct against them.

The very wealthy men who oppose this action illustrate the undoubted truth that some of the men who have the money touch, some of the men who can amass enormous fortunes, possess an ability as specialized and non-indicative of other forms of ability as the ability to play chess exceptionally well, or to add up four columns of figures at once. The men of wealth of this type are not only hostile to the interest of the country, but hostile to their own interests; their great business ability is unaccompanied by even the slightest ability to read the signs of the times or understand the temper of the American people.

I stand for the adequate control, the real control, of all big business, and especially of all monopolistic big business where it proves unwise or impossible to break up the monopoly.

There is a grim irony in the effect that has been produced upon Wall Street by the complete breakdown of the prosecutions against various trusts, notably the Standard Oil and Tobacco Trusts, under the Sherman Law. I have always insisted that, while the Sherman Law should be kept upon the books so as to be used wherever possible against monopoly, yet that it is by itself wholly unable to afford the relief demanded by the American people as against all the great corporations actually or potentially guilty of anti-social practices. Wall Street was at first flurried by the decisions in the Oil and Tobacco Trust cases. But as regards the Sherman Anti-Trust Law, Wall Street has now caught up with the Administration.

The President has expressed his entire satisfaction with the Anti-Trust Law, and now that the result of the prosecutions under it has been to strengthen the Standard Oil and Tobacco Trusts, to increase the value of their stocks, and, at least in the case of the Standard Oil, to increase the price to the consumer, Wall Street is also showing in practical fashion its satisfaction with the workings of the law, by its antagonism to us who intend to establish a real control of big business which shall not harm legitimate business, but shall really, and not nominally, put a stop to the evil practices of evil combinations.

The President has stated that he distrusts “impulsive action” by the public. I certainly greatly prefer deliberate action by the public, and in every proposal I have ever made I have always provided for such deliberate action. But I prefer even impulsive action by the public to action by the politicians against the interests of the public, whether this action be taken in tricky haste or with tricky deliberation. The President has warned us against soap-box primaries. At least these primaries are better than the primaries which represented the “impulsive action of the postmasters in States like Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina, when these “impulsive” postmasters held their conventions at the earliest possible date, so as to affect the result in other States of the Union where there is a genuine Republican party.

I see by the press that in your own State [Kentucky] the postmasters have been warned to resign their leadership in the party committees; but, if the statements in the press are correct, the resignations are not demanded with any “impulsiveness.” On the contrary, they have been asked with such leisurely deliberation that the day for holding the primaries will have passed before the request becomes effective. Now, gentlemen, if the newspaper reports are correct, such a request is a good deal worse than a sham.

We are in a period of change; we are fronting a great period of further change. Never was the need more imperative for men of vision who are also men of action. Disaster is ahead of us if we trust to the leadership of the men whose hearts are seared and whose eyes are blinded, who believe that we can find safety in dull timidity and dull action, The unrest cannot be quieted by the ingenious trickery of those who profess to advance by merely marking time. It cannot be quieted by demanding only the prosperity which is to come to those who have little. There must be material prosperity; they are enemies of all of us who wantonly or unwisely interfere with or disregard it; but it can come in permanent shape only if obtained in accordance with, not against, the spirit of justice and of righteousness.

Clouds hover about the horizon throughout the civilized world. But here in America the fault is our own if the sky above us is not clear. We have a continent on which to work out or destiny. Our people, our men and women, are fit to face the mighty days. If we fail, the failure will be lamentable; for not only shall we fail for ourselves, but our failure will wreck the fond desires of all throughout the world who look toward us with the eager hope that here, in this great Republic, it shall be proved, from ocean to ocean, that the people can rule themselves, and, thus ruling, can give liberty and do justice both to themselves and to others.

The present contest is but a phase of the larger struggle. Assuredly the fight will go on. Our opponents, representing the brute power of ceded privilege, can win only by using the led captains of mercenary politics, and the crooked financiers who stand behind those led captains, and those newspapers which those financiers and politicians own, influence, or control. They can win only by playing upon the timidity or the shortsightedness or the mere lack of knowledge of worthy citizens, and by misleading them into supporting for the moment the powers that prey, the powers that pillage, the dread powers that exploit the people for their own purpose, and that turn popular government into a sinister sham.

Certain big men, who, alas have sometimes perverted the courts to their own uses, now tell us that it is impious to speak of the people’s insisting upon justice being done by the courts. We answer that with all our might we will uphold the courts against lawlessness; and that we also intend to see that in their turn the courts give justice to all. We say, in the words of Lincoln, that we must prevent wrong “being done either by Congress or courts. The people of these United States are rightful masters of both Congress and courts, not to overthrow the Constitution, but to overthrow the men who prevent the Constitution.”

Again, Lincoln stated our case today when he said, in the course of his joint debate with Douglas, “That is the real issue. That is the issue which will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between these two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world. They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time. The one is the common right of humanity, the other the divine right of kings. It is the same principle in whatever shape it develops itself. It is the same spirit that says: You toil and work and earn bread and I’ll eat it. No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who bestrides the people of his own nation and lives from the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle.”

And of course this applies no more to the slave-owner or to the foreign despot than to the present-day American citizen who oppresses others by the abuse of special privilege, be his wealth great or little, be he the multi-millionaire owner of railways and mines and factories who forgets his duties to those who earn him his bread while earning their own, or be he only the owner of a foul little sweatshop in which he grinds dollars from the excessive and underpaid labor of haggard women.

We who stand for the cause of progress, for the cause of the uplift of humanity and the betterment of mankind, are pledged to eternal war against tyranny and wrong, by the few or by the many, by a plutocracy or by a mob. We stand for justice and for fair play; fearless and confident we face the coming years, for we know that ours are the banners of justice and that all men who wish well to the people must fight under them. We fight to make this country a better place to live in for those who have been harshly treated by fat; and if we succeed, it will also be a better place to live in for those who have been treated? None of us can really prosper permanently if masses of men and women are ground down and forced to lead starved and sordid lives so that their souls are crippled like their bodies and the fine edge of their every feeling is blunted.

I ask that those of us to whom Providence, to whom fate, has been kind, remember that each must be his brother’s keeper, and that all must feel their obligation to the less fortunate who work beside us in the strain and press of our eager modern life. I ask justice for the weak for their sakes, and I ask it also for the sake of our own children, and of our children’s children who are to come after us. This country will not be a good place for any of us to live in if it is not a reasonably good place for all of us to live in. When I plead the cause of the crippled brakeman on a railway, of the overworked girl in a factory, of the stunted child toiling at inhuman labor, or all who work excessively or in unhealthy surroundings, of the family dwelling in the squalor of a noisome tenement, of the worn out farmer in regions where the farms are worn out also; when I protest against the unfair profits of unscrupulous and conscienceless men, or against the greedy exploitation of the helpless by the beneficiaries of privilege—in all these case I am not only fighting for the weak, I am also fighting for the strong. The sons of all of us will pay in the future if we of the present do not do justice in the present. If the fathers amuse others to eat bitter bread, the teeth of their own sons shall be set on edge. Our cause is the cause of justice for all, in the interest of all. Surely there was never a more noble cause; surely there was never a cause in which it was better worth while to spend and be spent.