

**Theodore Roosevelt, Remarks at Symphony Hall, Boston, August 25, 1902**

**(excerpt).**

I want to take up this evening the general question of our economic and social relations, with specific reference to that problem with which I think our people are now greatly concerning themselves ... the existence of the great corporations which we rather loosely designate as trusts.

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It is worse than useless for any of us to rail at or regret the great growth of our industrial civilization during the last half century. Speaking academically, we can, according to our several temperaments, regret that the old days with the old life have vanished, or not, just as we choose; but we are here tonight only because of the play of those great forces ... The practical thing to do is to face the conditions as they are and see if we can not get the best there is in them out of them.

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When I ask that the question of the trusts be taken up, I am acting in the most conservative sense in property's interest. When a great corporation is sued for violating the anti-trust law, it is not a move against property, because when we make it evident that all men, great and small alike, have to obey the law, we put the safeguard of the law around all men. When we make it evident that no man shall be excused for violating the law, we make it evident that every man will be protected from violations of the law.

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When this government was founded there were no great individual or corporate fortunes, and commerce and industry were being carried on very much as they had been carried on in the days when Nineveh and Babylon stood in the Mesopotamian Valley. Sails, oars, wheels—these were the instruments of commerce. The pack train, the wagon train, the rowboat, the sailing craft— these were the methods of commerce. Everything has been revolutionized in the business world since then, and the progress of civilization from being a dribble has become a torrent. There was no particular need at that time of bothering as to whether the nation or the State had control of corporations. They were easy to control. Now, however, the exact reverse is the case. And remember when I say corporations I do not mean merely trusts technically so-called, merely combinations of corporations, or corporations under certain peculiar conditions. . . . I want laws that will enable us to deal with any evil no matter what shape it takes. I want to see the government able to get at it definitely; so that the action of the government can not be evaded by any turning within or without Federal or State statutes. At present we have really no efficient control over a big corporation which does business in more than one State. Frequently the corporation has nothing whatever to do with the State in which it is incorporated except to get incorporated; and all its business may be done in entirely different communities—communities which may object very much to the methods of incorporation in the State named. . . . we have a great, powerful, artificial creation which has no creator to which it is responsible. The creator creates it and then it-goes and operates somewhere else; and there is no interest on the part of the creator to deal with it. It does not do anything where the creator has power; it operates entirely outside of the creator's jurisdiction.

It is of course a mere truism to say that the corporation is the creature of the State, that the State is sovereign. There should be a real and not a nominal sovereign, some one sovereign to which the corporation shall be really and not nominally responsible. . . .

What I hope to see is power given to the National Legislature which shall make the control real. It would be an excellent thing if you could have all the States act on somewhat similar lines so that you would make it unnecessary for the national government to act; but all of you know perfectly well that the States will not act on similar lines. No advance whatever has been made in the direction of intelligent dealing by the States as a collective body with these great corporations. Here in Massachusetts you have what I regard as, on the whole, excellent corporation laws. Most of our difficulties would be in fair way of solution if we had the power to put upon the national statute books, and did put upon them, laws for the nation much like those you have here on the subject of corporations in Massachusetts. So you can see, gentlemen, I am not advocating anything very revolutionary. I am advocating action to prevent anything revolutionary. Now, if we can get adequate control by the nation of these great corporations, then we can pass legislation which will give us the power of regulation and supervision over them. If the nation had that power, mind you, I should advocate as strenuously as I know how that the power should be exercised with extreme caution and self-restraint. No good will come from plunging in without having looked carefully ahead.

The first thing we want is publicity and I do not mean publicity as a favor by some corporations-- I mean it as a right from all corporations affected by the law. I want publicity as to the essential facts in which the public has an interest. I want the knowledge given to the accredited representatives of the people of facts upon which

those representatives can if they see fit to base their action later. The publicity itself would cure many evils. The light of day is a greater deterrer of wrongdoing. The mere fact of being able to put out nakedly, and with the certainty that the statements were true, a given condition of things that was wrong, would go a long distance toward curing that wrong; and, even where it did not cure it, would make the path evident by which to cure it. We would not be leaping in the dark; we would not be striving blindly to see what was good and what bad. We would know what the facts were and be able to shape our course accordingly.

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I believe that it is possible to frame national legislation which shall give us far more power than we now have, at any rate over corporations doing an interstate business.

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If my belief is wrong, if it proves evident that we can not, under the Constitution as it is, give the national administration sufficient power to deal with these great corporations, then no matter what our reverence for the past, our duty to the present and the future will force us to see that some power is conferred upon the national government. And when that power has been conferred, then it will rest with the national government to exercise it.

*Alfred Henry Lewis, ed. A compilation of the Messages and Speeches of Theodore Roosevelt, 1901- 1905. Washington, DC: Bureau of National Literature and Art, 1906, 67-72.*