

Remarks of Mr. Chief Justice HUGHES on Thursday, February 1, 1940, in response to the addresses made by Mr. Attorney General Jackson and Mr. Charles A. Beardsley, President of the American Bar Association, in recognition of the One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the First Session of the Supreme Court.

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Mr. Chief Justice HUGHES said:

Mr. Attorney General and Mr. Beardsley: The Court welcomes the words of appreciation you have spoken in recognition of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the day appointed for the first session of this tribunal. We are highly gratified at the presence of distinguished Senators and Representatives,—the members of the Judiciary Committees of the Houses of Congress and of the Special Joint Committee appointed in relation to this occasion. We trust that what has been said echoes a sentiment cherished in the hearts of the American people. They have again and again evinced the sound instinct which leads them, regardless of any special knowledge of legal matters, to cherish as their priceless possession the judicial institutions which safeguard the reign of law as opposed to despotic will. Democracy is a most hopeful way of life, but its promise of liberty and of human betterment will be but idle words save as the ideals of justice, not only between man and man, but between government and citizen, are held supreme.

The States have the power and privilege of administering justice except in the field delegated to the Nation, and in that field there is a distinct and compelling need. The recognition of this anniversary implies the persistence, through the vicissitudes of one hundred and fifty years, of the deep and abiding conviction that amid the clashes of political policies, the martial demands of crusaders, the appeals of sincere but conflicting voices, the outbursts of passion and of the prejudices growing out of particular interests, there must be somewhere the quiet, deliberate and effective determination of an arbiter of the fundamental questions which inevitably grow out of our constitutional system and must be determined in controversies as to individual rights. It is the unique function of this Court, not to dictate policy, not to promote or oppose crusades, but to maintain the balance between States and Nation through the maintenance of the rights and duties of individuals.

But necessary as is this institution, its successful working has depended upon its integrity and the confidence thus inspired. By the method of selection, the tenure of office, the removal from the bias of political ambition, the people have sought to obtain as impartial a body as is humanly possible and to safeguard their basic interests from impairment by the partiality and the passions of politics. The ideals of the institution cannot, of course, obscure its human limitations. It does most of its work without special public attention to particular decisions. But ever and anon arise questions which excite an intense public interest, are divisive in character, dividing the opinion of lawyers as well as laymen. However serious the division of opinion, these cases must be decided. It should occasion no surprise that there should be acute differences of opinion on difficult questions of constitutional law when in every other field of human achievement, in art, theology, and even on the highest levels of scientific research, there are expert disputants. The more weighty the question, the more serious the debate, the more likely is the opportunity for honest and expert disagreement. This is a token of vitality. It is fortunate and not regrettable that the avenues of criticism are open to all whether they denounce or praise. This is a vital part of the democratic process. The essential thing is that the

independence, the fearlessness, the impartial thought and conscientious motive of those who decide should both exist and be recognized. And at the end of 150 years, this tribunal still stands as an embodiment of the ideal of the independence of the judicial function in this, the highest and most important sphere of its exercise.

We cannot recognize fittingly this anniversary without recalling the services of the men who have preceded us and whose work has made possible such repute as this institution enjoys. This tribunal works in a highly concrete fashion. The traditions it holds have been wrought out through the years at the conference table and in the earnest study and discussions of men constantly alive to a supreme obligation. We do not write on a blank sheet. The Court has its jurisprudence, the helpful repository of the deliberate and expressed convictions of generations of sincere minds addressing themselves to exposition and decision, not with the freedom of casual critics or even of studious commentators, but under the pressure and within the limits of a definite official responsibility.

To one who over twenty-nine years ago first took his seat upon this Bench, this day is full of memories of associations with those no longer with us, who wrought with strength and high purpose according to the light that was given them, in complete absorption in their judicial duty. We pay our tribute to these men of the more recent period as we recognize our indebtedness to their eminent predecessors. We venerate their example. Reflection upon their lives brings emphasis to the thought that even with the tenure of the judicial office, the service of individuals however important in their day soon yields to the service of others who must meet new problems and carry on in their own strength.

The generations come and go but the institutions of our Government have survived. This institution survives as essential to the perpetuation of our constitutional form of government,—a system responsive to the needs of a people who seek to maintain the advantages of local government over local concerns and at the same time the necessary national authority over national concerns, and to make sure that the fundamental guarantees with respect to life, liberty and property, and of freedom of speech, press, assembly and religion shall be held inviolate. The fathers deemed that system of government well devised to secure the blessings of liberty to themselves and their posterity. Whether that system shall continue does not rest with this Court but with the people who have created that system. As Chief Justice Marshall said: “The people made the Constitution, and the people can unmake it. It is the creature of their will, and lives only by their will”. It is our responsibility to see that their will as expressed in their Constitution shall be faithfully executed in the determination of their controversies.

And deeply conscious of that responsibility, in the spirit and with the loyalty of those who have preceded us, we now rededicate ourselves to our task.

{ THE END. }