The Problem of Factions

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was a Swiss-French philosopher and political theorist. Rousseau believed that in essence people were good and that the inequality and oppression we see around us originates not in our nature but from the institutions under which we are governed. In a formal argument he advanced in his work “The Social Contract” he explained that we were willing to leave the “state of nature” and embrace these institutions because of the “civil liberties” they provided us with. However, to protect us from the worst excesses of government we should insure that it follows the “general will.”

It follows from what has gone before that the general will is always right and tends to the public advantage; but it does not follow that the deliberations of the people are always equally correct. Our will is always for our own good, but we do not always see what that is; the people is never corrupted, but it is often deceived, and on such occasions only does it seem to will what is bad.

There is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will; the latter considers only the common interest, while the former takes private interest into account, and is no more than a sum of particular wills: but take away from these same wills the pluses and minuses that cancel one another, and the general will remains as the sum of the differences.

If, when the people, being furnished with adequate information, held its deliberations, the citizens had no communication one with another, the grand total of the small differences would always give the general will, and the decision would always be good. But when factions arise, and partial associations are formed at the expense of the great association, the will of each of these associations becomes general in relation to its members, while it remains particular in relation to the State: it may then be said that there are no longer as many votes as there are men, but only as many as there are associations. The differences become less numerous and give a less general result. Lastly, when one of these associations is so great as to prevail over all the rest, the result is no longer a sum of
small differences, but a single difference; in this case there is no longer a general will,
and the opinion which prevails is purely particular.

It is therefore essential, if the general will is to be able to express itself, that there
should be no partial society within the State, and that each citizen should think only his
own thoughts

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AS long as several men in assembly regard themselves as a single body, they
have only a single will which is concerned with their common preservation and general
well-being. In this case, all the springs of the State are vigorous and simple and its rules
clear and luminous; there are no embroilments or conflicts of interests; the common good
is everywhere clearly apparent, and only good sense is needed to perceive it. Peace, unity
and equality are the enemies of political subtleties. Men who are upright and simple are
difficult to deceive because of their simplicity; lures and ingenious pretexts fail to impose
upon them, and they are not even subtle enough to be dupes. When, among the happiest
people in the world, bands of peasants are seen regulating affairs of State under an oak,
and always acting wisely, can we help scorning the ingenious methods of other nations,
which make themselves illustrious and wretched with so much art and mystery?

A State so governed needs very few laws; and, as it becomes necessary to issue
new ones, the necessity is universally seen. The first man to propose them merely says
what all have already felt, and there is no question of factions or intrigues or eloquence in
order to secure the passage into law of what every one has already decided to do, as soon
as he is sure that the rest will act with him.

But when…particular interests begin to make themselves felt and the smaller
societies to exercise an influence over the larger, the common interest changes and finds
opponents: opinion is no longer unanimous; the general will ceases to be the will of all;
contradictory views and debates arise; and the best advice is not taken without question.

Finally, when the State, on the eve of ruin, maintains only a vain, illusory and
formal existence, when in every heart the social bond is broken, and the meanest interest
brazenly lays hold of the sacred name of "public good," the general will becomes mute:
all men, guided by secret motives, no more give their views as citizens than if the State
had never been; and iniquitous decrees directed solely to private interest get passed under the name of laws.

(Excerpts from Book II chapter 3 and Book IV chapter 1 of “The Social Contract”)