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Comment

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Comment by the Editor

POLITICAL DEBATE

Politics and the weather are probably the most common topics of conversation in the world. The principal distinction seems to be that people seldom propose to do anything about the weather. But with politics it is different. Reformers are ever at large; substantial citizens argue perennially for their favorite panacea; while ambitious politicians predict the doom of society unless their party runs the government.

Political democracy has been established, but the problem still remains of making popular control fruitful by determining the proper objects to which it should be devoted; and the question of ends is simple compared to devising the methods of achieving those ends. So the debate goes on and on perpetually through endless assertions and continual refutation. The issues are as complex as the diversity of human interests; alternative decisions are neither clear nor completely satisfactory; public opinion is always somewhat confused; and the final solution is never attained.

In the whole realm of political discussion no more effective way of influencing the public has ever been conceived than joint debate. Face to face in the

presence of the sovereign people, the proponents of opposing policies are compelled to state their positions plainly and in vivid contrast. Dissimulation, artifice, or misrepresentation is promptly exposed, so that the issue is truly drawn in its stark and unencumbered form for all to recognize who will. The fog of innuendo and subterfuge which clouds political campaign literature is dispelled in joint debate.

The classic Lincoln and Douglas debates on the question of slavery in 1858 were fresh in the minds of the voters of Iowa when Samuel J. Kirkwood and Augustus C. Dodge canvassed the State in a series of ruthless forensic encounters to win the office of Governor in 1859. In other campaigns since then rival candidates for public office in Iowa have often stumped the State together. James B. Weaver and William P. Hepburn, both masters of parliamentary repartee, were always ready to meet their opponents in joint discussions of the prevailing issues. But the triangular gubernatorial campaign of 1883 was probably the most dramatic exhibition of political debating in the history of Iowa.

J. E. B.