

THE ELEANOR AND ANNA ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

March 30th, 1949 (catalog date)

Description: In this segment, ER discusses how to be an active participant in the government.

Participants: ER

[ER:] Thank you, Anna. I am often and very earnestly asked this question: "What can I do to be a good citizen? How can I take an active part in my government?" It's a very good question, and it should be answered. I think it is most encouraging that more and more people are asking it so often and so sincerely, and particularly I am glad that more and more women are asking it. Sometimes we hear criticism of public apathy in government affairs and sometimes expressions of discouragement that the business of governing so large a country as ours is too complicated and specialized for the ordinary citizen to keep in touch with his government. The saving grace is this honest and deep desire on the part of most men and women to perform their duties as citizens fully and well, but there's always the danger that if we're not allowed to feel that we actually are a part of the working of the nation, if we're not allowed to use our strength and skills in this way, then our potential energies will turn to frustration, and lethargy and indifference will be the result. It is tragic when this happens, for our country can use the services of all in making our democracy better.

A man who knows quite a lot about this subject, David Lilienthal, has written, "I find it impossible to comprehend how democracy can be a living reality if people are remote from their government and in their daily lives are not made a part of it, or if the control and direction of making a living-- in industry, farming, or the distribution of goods-- is far removed from the stream of life and from the local community." When people ask me how to bring government and democracy closer to the grassroots level, I have a few suggestions to make. I feel that one of the important things is for all of us to know our local people who carry on the government in our own community. They're our friends, they're people that we can meet and talk to and discuss with, and good government at the top is only the mirror of good government all the way up. And it's in our communities that we choose the people to represent us on county committees, on state committees, and finally, of course, on national committees. And these committees are the framework of our party organizations and our parties represent the choices we have made for people to work on these committees and these people are people we can know. We certainly can know the people that we choose in our own community to serve on our county committee and later, to serve on our state committee, and they will know about whoever it may be who serves on our national committee. And through our parties we can get better candidates for office in our state legislature and in our Congress and therefore, it's important to work in our parties, and that we can do on the community level.

Of course, in this age of big business, we do need a big government and some centralization is inevitable, but the more activity we can bring down to the local communities the better, and the less paper decisions have to be made the better. Mr. Lilienthal says again, "making decisions from papers has a dehumanizing effect and much of man's inhumanity of man can be explained by it," and that really is because we don't take enough interest in our own communities.

There's a good example of this inhumanity that comes from not knowing. In Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, one of Napoleon's generals is studying his papers when a captive is brought in. Before the general raises his head from his papers, where human affairs and lives are indicated by numbers, he could easily have ordered the captive shot without a twinge of conscience. But, when the general looks at the man before him, he sees no longer a number on a paper, but a human being. It is easier at the grassroots to see each citizen as a human being and it is good and healthful to do as much government work as possible at the grassroots. And now, back to my daughter, Anna, in Hollywood.

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