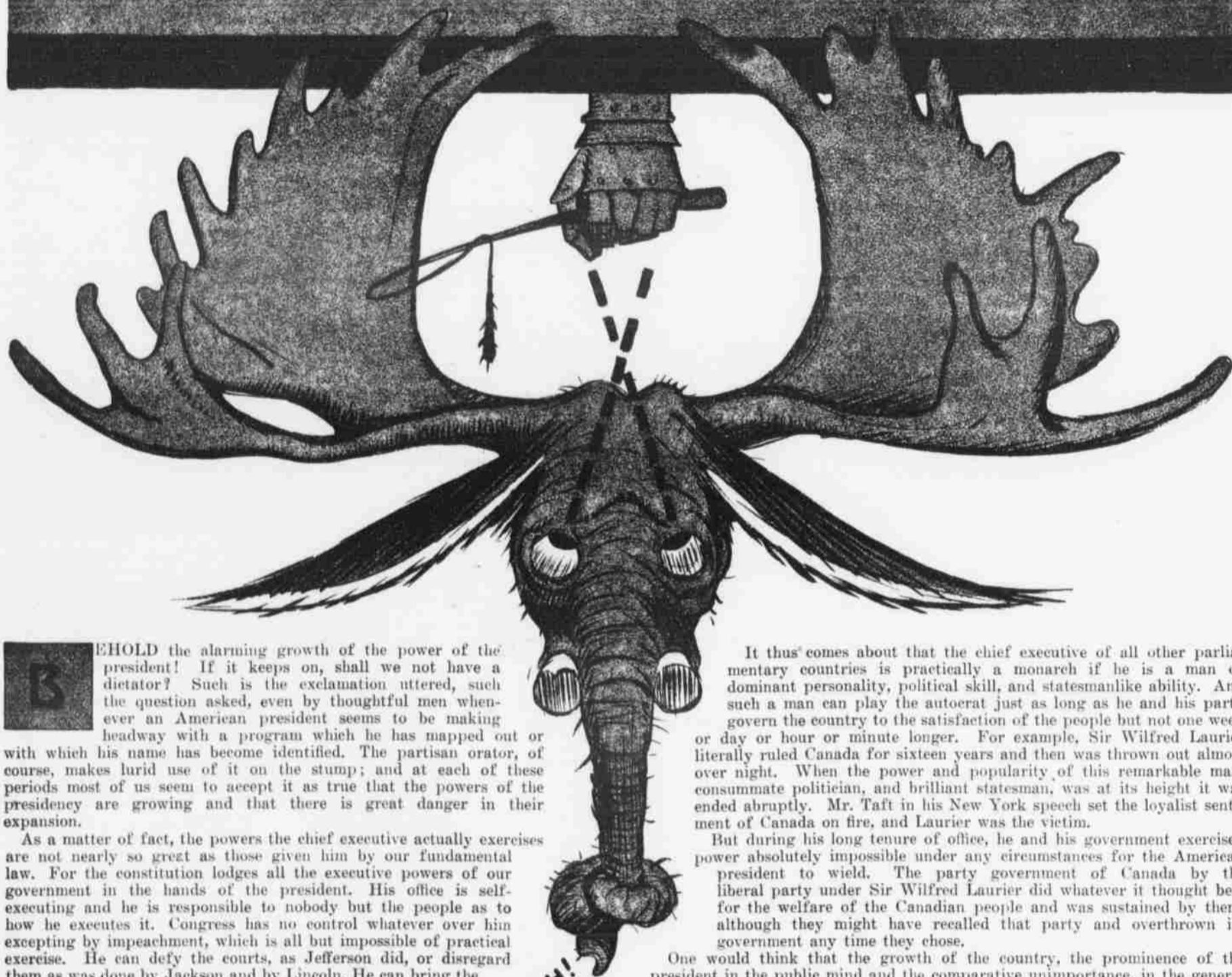


# THE POWER OF THE PRESIDENT

BY EX-SENATOR ALBERT J. BEVERIDGE



**B**EHOLD the alarming growth of the power of the president! If it keeps on, shall we not have a dictator? Such is the exclamation uttered, such the question asked, even by thoughtful men whenever an American president seems to be making headway with a program which he has mapped out or with which his name has become identified. The partisan orator, of course, makes lurid use of it on the stump; and at each of these periods most of us seem to accept it as true that the powers of the presidency are growing and that there is great danger in their expansion.

As a matter of fact, the powers the chief executive actually exercises are not nearly so great as those given him by our fundamental law. For the constitution lodges all the executive powers of our government in the hands of the president. His office is self-executing and he is responsible to nobody but the people as to how he executes it. Congress has no control whatever over him excepting by impeachment, which is all but impossible of practical exercise. He can defy the courts, as Jefferson did, or disregard them as was done by Jackson and by Lincoln. He can bring the entire armed force of the nation to bear upon a state as Jackson threatened to do in the case of South Carolina. Yet these many direct constitutional powers have been exercised so rarely that they have almost ceased to exist from want of use.

Contrary to the constitution, the American president has come to be the supreme representative of a political party. He is a party president and not a people's president. If it were possible for us under our constitution to have a party government, responsible to the people, this fact would, in reality, give the president very great power and simplify as well as popularize our government tremendously. But it is only once in a while that a party government is possible under the constitution. Even during such few and short spaces of party government it is impossible for us to have a responsible party government as every other free country in the world does have.

Compare this menaced condition in which the American president often finds himself with the power of the head of the government in Canada, Great Britain, France, or any other modern parliamentary government. In Canada and Great Britain for instance, party government is a reality in the most absolute sense of the word. There is, for practical purposes, only one house in the national legislature; the prime minister is selected by the political party that has a majority in this one house. He and every member of his cabinet have seats in parliament; every policy of his administration, every important law, is decided upon in a caucus of the members of his party or at least of the cabinet and the prime minister himself who usually presides over such caucuses.

It thus comes about that the chief executive of all other parliamentary countries is practically a monarch if he is a man of dominant personality, political skill, and statesmanlike ability. And such a man can play the autocrat just as long as he and his party govern the country to the satisfaction of the people but not one week or day or hour or minute longer. For example, Sir Wilfred Laurier literally ruled Canada for sixteen years and then was thrown out almost over night. When the power and popularity of this remarkable man, consummate politician, and brilliant statesman, was at its height it was ended abruptly. Mr. Taft in his New York speech set the loyalist sentiment of Canada on fire, and Laurier was the victim.

But during his long tenure of office, he and his government exercised power absolutely impossible under any circumstances for the American president to wield. The party government of Canada by the liberal party under Sir Wilfred Laurier did whatever it thought best for the welfare of the Canadian people and was sustained by them, although they might have recalled that party and overthrown its government any time they chose.

One would think that the growth of the country, the prominence of the president in the public mind and the comparative unimportance, in the general eye, of members of congress would magnify the presidential power. Every man, woman and child knows who the president is; pictures of him and his family always are printed by the million, and the features are familiar to everybody; the ordinary citizen looks upon the president as his peculiar representative in Washington and the real head of the government; anything that the president says is printed everywhere and read by everyone—his appeal is direct, personal, instantaneous, and nation-wide.

Also the fact that he appoints thousands of officeholders makes him the head of a great army of political agents located in every town and city of every state in the union. "How does he stand with the president?" is the first question office-seeking constituents or political organizations ask about a congressman or senator through whom they are striving for patronage.

All this, one would imagine would form a eudgel of influence which would give the president a power something like that in the hands of the heads of all other parliamentary governments; and a power, too, which, in its very nature, would steadily grow.

Yet the fact is that nothing of the kind has happened. Even Roosevelt, with all the force of his tremendous and unique personality, with such a popularity during most of his presidency as but few men ever had, with his almost uncanny skill of appeal to public opinion, with his party in control of both houses of congress, did not have the power that Washington wielded; and President Wilson's power over congress does not approach the czar-like sway of Jefferson. Between Washington and Jefferson came Adams, who