

An Imperishable Ideal of Liberty Under Law*

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We are in a time of keen distress and widespread misgivings. It is a world of unrest. The perennial strife with lawlessness has assumed new aspects and has brought society to new and serious tests of its ability to protect itself. Few, if any, have the gift of prophecy. This edifice, however, attests confidence. It suggests permanence; not the permanence of stone and steel, but an idea; not, in this respect, of particular formulas, but of a conception of the basic needs of our organized society. That confidence and suggestion of permanence spring no doubt from a belief that our people have political instincts and convictions which are not likely to be uprooted; that government of the people, for the people, by the people, notwithstanding all shortcomings, is not to perish; that such a government will continue to have, as it has had, its written prescriptions to secure distribution and limitation of governmental powers; that our territory is too vast and our political concerns too various to permit of an absolute centralization of authority, that distribution and limitation of powers under a written constitution cannot be maintained without an arbiter, as far removed as is practically possible from the disputes of parties and the manipulations of groups dominated by selfish interests; that in some practicable way the talent of the Nation for impartial determinations according to constitutional principles must find effective expression.

In estimating the basis for that confidence, we are well aware that we cannot find it in facilities—in structures—however beautiful and commodious, or in symbols and memorials, however appropriate. In laying the cornerstone of this temple, our thought is centered upon the temple not made with hands, the temple of the spirit, which will consecrate the service here and save it from the vanity of a formal ritual. We have pride and hope on this occasion because we believe, without underestimating adverse influences, that the spiritual resources of the Nation, from which each generation draws anew its conceptions of fair dealing, are unwasted, and because we find in this building a testimonial to an imperishable ideal of liberty under law.

*This eloquent statement, so appropriate to the present time, is part of the address delivered by Chief Justice Hughes on the occasion of laying the cornerstone of the Supreme Court building, October 13, 1932.