

Patrick Henry

At the Virginia Ratifying Convention

June 9, 1788

I cannot help taking notice of what the Honorable Gentleman said. To me it appears that there is no check in that Government. The President, Senators, and Representatives all immediately, or mediately, are the choice of the people. Tell me not of checks on paper; but tell me of checks founded on self-love. The English Government is founded on self-love. This powerful irresistible stimulus of self-love has saved that Government. It has interposed that hereditary nobility between the King and Commons. If the House of Lords assists or permits the King to overturn the liberties of the people, the same tyranny will destroy them; they will therefore keep the balance in the democratic branch. Suppose they see the Commons inroad upon the King; self-love, that great energetic check, will call upon them to interpose: For, if the King be destroyed, their destruction must speedily follow. Here is a consideration which prevails, in my mind, to pronounce the British Government, superior in this respect to any Government that ever was in any country. Compare this with your Congressional checks. I beseech Gentlemen to consider, whether they can say, when trusting power, that a mere patriotic profession will be equally operative and efficacious, as the check of self-love. In considering the experience of ages, is it

not seen, that fair disinterested patriotism, and professed attachment to rectitude have never been solely trusted to by an enlightened free people?--If you depend on your President's and Senators patriotism, you are gone. Have you a resting place like the British Government? Where is the rock of your salvation? The real rock of political salvation is *self-love* perpetuated from age to age in every human breast, and manifested in every action. If they can stand the temptations of human nature, you are safe. If you have a good President, Senators and Representatives, there is no danger.--But can this be expected from human nature? Without real checks it will not suffice, that some of them are good. A good President, or Senator, or Representative, will have a natural weakness.--Virtue will slumber. The wicked will be continually watching: Consequently you will be undone. Where are your checks? You have no hereditary Nobility.--An order of men, to whom human eyes can be cast up for relief: For, says the Constitution, there is no title of nobility to be granted; which, by the bye, would not have been so dangerous, as the perilous cession of powers contained in that paper: Because, as Montesquieu says, when you give titles of Nobility, you know what you give; but *when you give power, you know not what you give*.--If you say, that out of this depraved mass, you can collect luminous characters, it will not avail, unless this luminous breed will be propagated from generation to generation; and even then, if the number of vicious characters will preponderate, you are undone. And that this will certainly be the case, is, to my mind, perfectly clear.--In the British Government there are real balances and checks--In this system, there are only ideal balances. Till I am convinced

that there are actual efficient checks, I will not give my assent to its establishment. The President and Senators have nothing to lose. They have not that interest in the preservation of the Government, that the King and Lords have in England. They will therefore be regardless of the interests of the people. The Constitution will be as safe with one body, as with two. It will answer every purpose of human legislation. How was the Constitution of England when only the Commons had the power? I need only remark, that it was the most unfortunate aera when that country returned to King, Lords and Commons, without sufficient responsibility in the King. When the Commons of England, in the manly language which became freemen, said to their King, *you are our servant*, then the temple of liberty was complete. From that noble source, have we derived our liberty:--That spirit of patriotic attachment to one's country:--That zeal for liberty, and that enmity to tyranny which signalized the then champions of liberty, we inherit from our British ancestors. And I am free to own, that if you cannot love a Republican Government, you may love the British Monarchy; for, although the King is not sufficiently responsible, the responsibility of his agents, and the efficient checks interposed by the British Constitution, render it less dangerous than other Monarchies, or oppressive tyrannical Aristocracies.