**The Gift Shop Republic**

The Benjamin Franklin Museum sits just below street level in Franklin Court in Philadelphia, so that you step down off the pavement and feel, quite literally, as if you are dropping into the past; you pass the ghostly white steel outlines that mark where his house once stood, you read a few earnest information boards, you wander through rooms full of bifocals and printing presses and portraits, and at the end, as if by some natural law of modern culture, you emerge into the gift shop.

The shop is bright and well behaved, with that particular smell of new paper and cotton; shelves are lined with miniature Liberty Bells and tasteful notebooks, children tug at tricorn hats that visibly itch just to look at them, and a whole battalion of T-shirts assures you that Franklin adored naps, cats and witty one liners. There is a serious wall of books for those who feel guilty about only buying fridge magnets, yet my attention drifts instead to the mugs, where a familiar phrase curls in mock-colonial lettering around ceramic that has never been within three thousand miles of 1787. “A republic, if you can keep it.” You can buy it in navy, cream or a cheerful patriotic red.

The museum needs to pay the electricity bill somehow. Still, the scene creates a small, needling dissonance. Franklin’s most anxious sentence has been shrink wrapped and slotted between novelty socks and chocolate in historical packaging. A sentence that once cut through a hot Philadelphia crowd now lies at the bottom of tote bags among old receipts and crumbs; the wording survives yet the edge feels worn, and looking after the quotation is far easier than looking after the form of life it names.

The original scene has an almost theatrical quality. Delegates are finally leaving the Constitutional Convention after months of wrangling, the summer heat lies on Philadelphia like a hand, and a woman reputed as Elizabeth Powel asks Franklin what kind of government they have finally hammered out in that window-shuttered room. His reply refuses the language of glory; there is no talk of destiny or providence, only the dry verdict that they have created a republic, if they can keep it.

For Franklin, and for many of his contemporaries, it was obvious that republican government was not the natural resting place of human societies. The more usual arrangements were simpler and, in some ways, easier to understand: a monarch and his allies, or a general and his staff, ruling by birthright, by victory or by the sheer fact of holding the weapons. The American experiment instead claimed that ordinary citizens, working through assemblies, courts and written constitutions that fenced in rulers and tamed disputes, might govern themselves.

Two and a half centuries later, large parts of the West still inhabit political systems that trace their ancestry to that experiment, yet everyday life rarely feels as if it hangs on anything as grand as “self-government”. Parliaments sit, courts decide, agencies regulate; to many it shows up only in passing, squeezed into the margins of protracted screen time. When you spend longer choosing a streaming service than thinking about your constitution, it becomes easy to assume that the whole complicated contraption of representative rule and civil liberties would simply reassemble itself if we ever dropped it on the floor.

At the same time, our cleverness has migrated somewhere else. Walk out of Franklin Court, pull out a phone, and you can, in a few taps, locate the nearest café, translate a street sign, order a new pair of shoes and watch a stranger review a toaster with the seriousness of a drama critic. Engineers and designers have poured astonishing effort into perfecting the micro-experiences of private life. Every small friction in the day, from paying for the bus to talking to a distant friend, now has its own small, glossy technological solution. The talent is obvious, yet the civic ambition guiding it is often modest.

While attention and investment cluster around the realm of personal convenience, the solid, unglamorous foundations of self-government receive a rather cooler kind of affection. Power grids, water systems, bridges, court buildings, public broadcasters, electoral offices, these things do not make for thrilling product launches, yet if they falter, constitutions start to look like beautifully framed certificates in houses built on sand. The information systems on which public debate depends, from registers to archives to the infrastructure of credible journalism, require the same kind of care that we lavish on recommendation engines. Self-government is a high maintenance way to live, and much of that maintenance is boring.

Then there is the great buzzing space of digital communication itself, which presents as a neutral playground for opinions, yet behaves like anything but a level field. Feeds, trending lists, suggested videos, all quietly decide which voices rise and which sink, which stories travel far and which vanish under the fold. The result is an odd mix of intimacy and distance. Citizens are connected at all hours and can react to political events with a few thumb movements, yet they often inhabit local climates of belief so different that shared deliberation becomes a strained and fragile thing. It is hard to keep a republic when large sections of it are quite sure that the others are not only wrong but incomprehensible.

In this environment, public identity tends to grow thinner. People invest real passion in the badges offered by brands, sports teams, fandoms and online subcultures; the formal identity of “citizen” can feel pale beside the bright colours of these chosen tribes. Politics turns, in many places, into a spectator sport: we have teams, merchandise and highlight reels, but rather less of the slow, stubborn work of reading dull documents, attending local hustings, following budgets, holding small officials to account. The idea that one’s own efforts of attention and care might be necessary to keep alive the conditions under which one argues about anything at all slips very easily out of view.

Franklin would find much here to puzzle and to provoke him. He was, after all, an enthusiast for technology in the broad sense; he loved experiments, gadgets, ingenious solutions, and he was entirely content to profit from his printing business. Yet his notion of industry never stopped at private success. When he organised a lending library, he was not chasing the aesthetic pleasure of neat rows of volumes; he remarks in the *Autobiography* that “These libraries have improved the general conversation of the Americans” and “made the common tradesmen and farmers as intelligent as most gentlemen from other countries.” Access to literature had made people more capable and more independent, which in turn strengthened the society they shared. Even Franklin’s famous aphorisms about thrift and diligence were less a self-help programme than a kind of moral infrastructure project. A population that learned to read, to save a little, to plan ahead, was harder to bully and easier to involve in public decisions.

In Franklin's world, the new technologies of printing and communication were not treated as neutral toys that might accidentally do some good; they were deliberately directed towards uses that shored up the possibility of a free common life. He might be delighted by the ingenuity of smartphones and social networks, yet it is difficult to imagine him shrugging if those tools were used mainly to sell scented candles and broadcast minor quarrels while the institutions of the republic creaked quietly in the background.

To keep a republic in an age of sophisticated technology would mean rediscovering Franklin's sense that industry can be civic; that the effort of thought and invention poured into the private realm might also be poured into tools and arrangements that help people act together. It would mean treating the dull parts of the system as worthy of curiosity and pride, recognising that a well-maintained electoral register or a reliable local newspaper or a thoughtfully designed voting interface carries as much of the republic's weight as any speech or slogan. Only by thickening the everyday habits of citizenship will noticing what is done in our name – and challenging it – come to feel ordinary rather than a rare bout of civic virtue.

I imagine myself back under the fluorescent lights of that shop in Franklin Court, still turning the mug over in my hands whilst other visitors browse around me. The line curls around the ceramic in friendly ink, ready to be filled with tea and forgotten at the back of a cupboard. For a second the words float free of the merchandising and recover some of their original sharpness. *A republic, if you can keep it.* I realise that the keeping does not belong to museums, or souvenir makers, or even the distant figures in oil; it belongs, if anywhere, to whoever is holding the mug – and to what they care about once their hands are free.