

DIRECT LEGISLATION

Mr. Bride Presents a Thoughtful Discussion of the Referendum and Initiative

Editor Independent: At this time when there is much discussion as to the probability of securing needed legislation on the trusts and other important issues, all of us can see how easily the end could be reached through the initiative and referendum as demanded by all of the leaders for reform. However intensely patriotic we may be, however our confidence in our legislatures, no one can deny that there are evils in our system of legislation and that these evils must be cured.

Those of us who favor the scheme lay down a cardinal, and we believe self-evident, truth that man is capable of self-government. We do not state this as a partisan doctrine, but as a simple axiomatic truth. It is democratic doctrine. We of the Jeffersonian belief find many such expressions in the words of our eloquent and distinguished leader, Col. William J. Bryan. You of the republican belief can read John Hay, who in his work called "Castilian Days" states as a fundamental truth that "No people are fit for anything else." We reaffirm that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. These are the foundation stones of our creed. Our orators have proclaimed them, our parents have taught them and our unconquerable love for liberty has instilled into our souls our most precious thoughts. We believe that the best governments then are those in closest touch with their people. America is said to be the best government on earth, and why, simply because it is our system that brings the masses in closest proximity to legislation. This is a cure for anarchy. As long as a man believes that there is a way open to remedy his ills, he will fight for them peaceably; but when he finds that there is no outlet, then anarchy breeds.

We propose a system that will link more closely the now adverse elements of citizen and state. We advance a system, not new, but one perfectly in accord with our doctrines of equality. We demand the adoption of the initiative, whereby the citizen may propose his ideas to the state and have them heard. There can be no evil in having ideas of government presented. We do not believe in the autocratic spirit of legislatures. We believe that measures that are adverse to the public interest are often passed and the people must submit. We propose to remedy this by the adoption of the referendum, by which measures having passed congress, shall be submitted to popular vote on demand of a certain percentage of citizens. If the idea is a good one and a majority of the people accept it, the measure becomes a law. If it fails to secure a majority of the citizens, then the measure is lost. We are told then that this would destroy the "balance" erected by the founders of the republic and that the larger states would thus crowd the smaller ones. A system could be arranged like the electoral college giving a vote similar to that. In this way "state's rights," as now defined, could exist. Thus the check of the state would still be left on the people.

This argument about "balance" is always the first sprung and now having shown you that this could be arranged, we recur again to our original proposition that man is capable of self-government. If this is true, and we do not believe that it shall be opposed, for our government rests upon the truth of this assertion, we advance that the people are capable of acting directly on public questions. In every state of this union, with the single exception of Delaware, all amendments to the state constitutions are referred to the people for their acceptance or rejection. If the people are capable of judging on constitutional questions—questions that place limits on all statute laws, questions of foresight and questions of far-reaching influence and importance, they are surely capable to judge on questions of a less comprehensive nature. An amendment to the state constitution of Nebraska was proposed at the recent election; the state of Wisconsin has recently presented to its electors the question as to the suffrage of women and other states have also presented other important questions thus proving their confidence in the people. The very fact that many states provide that vital measures must first be submitted to the votes of the electors testifies to both the justice and the safety of a measure that would give to them the power to legislate by direct action. Every question of great import—such as large budgets, removal of state cap-

itols, the chartering of national banks, are all referred to the people before their effect can be realized.

We believe that if the people are capable of acting directly that it follows that when they speak for themselves that their interests will be better protected than when they speak through those who may have personal interests at stake. We have seen instances, which the opposition will not deny, that prove only too conclusively the truth of our observations. We have seen a republican industrial commission, a body appointed at their own hands, report that the rebate system operated in restraint of trade, yet with a republican majority in both houses of congress and a republican president, no action has been taken in the premises. It is simply because the halls of congress are crowded with men ready and willing to obey the crack of the master's whip and support or negative measures antagonistic to their own interests. Trusts and their capitalists can and so fluctuate the market to reward those whose work has been well done. Under existing conditions the people are not asked what they desire, but corporations and monopolies reaching for additional franchises of incalculable value receive immediate attention—in consideration of their contributions to campaign funds, for their wrath means defeat for re-election. We have seen the mayor of Philadelphia refuse an offer of \$2,500,000 for a railway franchise and yet give it free to other parties. Would the people have done this? The answer to this last question bears out our proposition that the people acting directly are their own best masters. But would the referendum cure this? The order would be reversed if the electors had the power to legislate directly, as it would be useless to bribe legislatures to enact objectionable laws or grant objectionable franchises when the people could veto them. If there were no courts of law, there would be less honesty. As there are no courts of popular will to which to refer legislative bills, there is no damper to protect the people's safety from the insatiable love of gold and the willingness of legislators to succumb to bribery.

"Gold! This yellow slave Will knit and break religions, bless the accurs'd, Make the hoar leprosy ador'n. Place thieves And give them title, knee and approbation With senators on the bench."

We are told that the system is too radical. We believe the present system radical and the application of a check to it by holding up its hastily passed measures would rather conserve than make more radical the passage of laws. During the last several days of congress numbers of important measures are passed and defeated with little or no debate. The New York World, describing the last days of the sessions, said: "The lower legislative body has been working like a huge threshing machine grinding out thousands of bills without consideration." Can a system which will hold up a measure until it can be carefully and maturely considered radicalize a system which allows measures of import to be acted on at the instant? We think not. We offer a remedy that will say "No! Gentlemen, this bill is wrong! You can go so far, but when you block the will of the people, you must prepare for their charge." Of course this rests upon the truth of the assertion that the sole object of political machinery should be, and we believe is, to ascertain and carry out the will of the people. We believe that our system will conserve legislation, for we have seen the people of Switzerland refuse such laws as we are told the people would pass because of their radical-

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ism. Not so long ago the question of governmental ownership of railroads was presented to them and their refusal was overwhelming. We believe that the people are much more conservative than their representatives. In fact we shall lay it down as a truth that the largest percentage of defects in our government is due to the representative and party systems now in vogue. The infidelity of our representatives is too well known to admit of discussion and the absence of ways in which the minority can make their wants known all add to the strength of our system. We are told that the system would be a weapon in the hands of the minority in which to harass the majority in power. On the other hand, it makes the majority more tolerant and the object of government after all is to protect the minority for "majorities can take care of themselves," says Ingalls.

We have seen, for instance, the state of Maryland giving a majority of a bare few hundred votes and returning a solid delegation of one party. While the minority a few hundred votes behind had no way in which to make their wants known to the legislative branch. To the evils of the party system. Mind, I do not think that the initiative and referendum would destroy parties, nor do I wish it. They are the necessary instruments of a people desiring liberty and as long as we are a free people I do not think that they will retire. Today the voter must support the man to get the prin-

ciple. In this day of bossism, it is not always the best man nominated, but the one most flexible to the master's order. If the man is bad, we must support a bad man to get good principle, or vice versa. But take an ideal case. Both candidates are good men, both of them standing squarely on their party's platform. Imagine the man who favors the imperial policy of our late lanneted president and is heartily opposed to his protective and financial policies. Imagine the man who, though opposed to the annexation of the Philippines, yet favors the policy of the republican party on the trust question. How can this man vote? He must either swallow the financial policy of McKinley to keep the Philippine policy or he must sacrifice his ideas of manifest destiny of empire to express his views on the money question. What a travesty on legislation! Under our system the vote can be cast for the best man and when the time comes to vote on the question directly he may express his views on each separately. What a Utopia to the party-laden voter of today. Then, and not until then, will this be a popular government—one deriving its authority from the consent of the governed.

Today the people's word is not taken. I have seen petitions with a hundred thousand signatures presented to congress and no action taken. As one writer on the subject says: "Today a word spoken at some hotel bar, or a low jest in the lobby, a little transac-