

MR. BRYAN ON CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS

Mr. Bryan's speech at New York meeting of Publicity Organization:

I am very much interested in the movement which this meeting represents, and I appreciate the strong part that the chairman, Mr. Belmont, is taking in it. I had a conversation with him more than two years ago, when he prepared a paper, I think for the North American Review, on this subject. I have been interested in all that he has done since, and I want to lend whatever influence I may have to the carrying out of the idea that this movement presents. It rests upon the theory that politics should be honest, and while no one will dispute the proposition, there is not at times as much enthusiasm in favor of the proposition when concretely applied, as there ought to be. There can be no honest politics where any interest in the country can purchase before the election a promise that certain things will be done after the election, and the promise be concealed from the voters.

If I understand our theory of government, it assumes that those in office represent the people who put them in office, and we write platforms for no other purpose than to announce to the public in advance what the candidates will do if elected. We go before the country and we solicit the support of the people upon the condition, and only upon the condition, that they want carried out the things that are stated in the platform. And it is the purpose of those who write the platforms, or should be, to state the party's position on all the questions that are likely to be acted on by those who are elected. Now that is the basis of our reasoning in this matter, and it is not honest politics for a party to write a platform, nominate a ticket and go out and appeal to the voters to support that ticket because of that platform, if there is a secret understanding that some other policy will be carried out.

The objection to the campaign funds that are contributed secretly, and spent secretly, is that they are contributed for a purpose that the public does not understand, and to carry out a policy against the public. That is the objection we have to campaign contributions contributed and expended secretly. This question would not arise but for the existence in this country of great corporations that have an interest in legislation. If we had no corporations the chances are that no individual would be personally and pecuniarily interested enough in legislation to contribute any large amount—that is, larger than his patriotic impulse would lead him to contribute. But when we have great corporations that not only receive their charters from the government, but even ask favors of the legislatures, or if they do not ask favors of the legislatures, ask immunity from the executive—because we have these great corporations, it has become the custom to run campaigns with funds supplied secretly and used secretly; after the election the people who subscribed the funds dominate the government and the people who do the voting are betrayed by those for whom they voted.

That is the situation, and before a remedy can be suggested the situation must be understood. Now, this evil has not been confined to one party. A very interesting bit of testimony was brought out in the investigation of the sugar trust.

Mr. Havemeyer testified that he had been in the habit of contributing to campaign funds, to one party in one state, to another party in another state, according to the political complexion of the state.

How are you going to stop it? In the first place, a law making it unlawful for a corporation to contribute to a campaign fund will go a good ways. But that is not sufficient. I would not be willing to stop at that—to merely prevent a corporation from contributing to campaign funds. If we had a law forbidding corporations to contribute to campaign funds you would find that there were no corporations that contributed, but that individuals did, who represented the corporations. And it is too difficult a task to show that the individual gets the money out of the corporation to make the contribution, for if a few men control the corporation, the man at the head of it may pay the money out of his own pocket today and he may not be reimbursed for two or three or five years hence. If evasions of that kind are possible, the law is not sufficient.

What else is necessary? I believe there is one thing possible. That is that the large contributions, no matter from whom they come, shall be made known; for when we see the head of a trust, or other corporation interested in

legislation, contributing a large sum of money we know that he is not doing it for himself, but that he is doing it for the corporation, or because of his interest therein, and that he expects to get back in legislation more than he contributed to the campaign fund.

If we are going to have publications, which I regard as necessary, then another question arises. When shall the publication be made? Now I want to present a thought on this phase of the subject. I believe that the publication should be made before the election, and I will tell you why. In a campaign the parties may deny that they are getting any money at all from corporations or from persons representing or acting for corporations or interested in corporations. I have known statements of that kind to be made when they were not founded on fact, and I am afraid we have not had such a regeneration of the individual that they might not be made in the future. And when the published statement is delayed until after the election what redress have the people? The sale has been made; the men have been elected. The people can not recall their votes. What can they do then? Wait until the next election. It would be claimed at the next election by the party guilty of the offense that the persons in charge of the last campaign were put out and an entirely new set pledged to reform put in and thus the people might be fooled again. And the party that can get into power usually has enough men to keep up the delusion. And of course after two or three campaigns they are changed and they come back and use the first set again, because by that time these are supposed to have a change of heart so that they would not again do wrong.

My faith in the doctrine that you can fool all the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time was a little shaken by an explanation I once heard, namely, that it is not necessary to fool all the people all the time. Fool some this year and some next, and some the next, and then the fourth year you can fool the first set again.

The only way I see out of it is to compel the publication BEFORE THE ELECTION, and then when the people see where the campaign money is coming from they will have a right to form their opinion as to the reason for the contribution. It seems to me that an important part of this measure ought to be a provision that I will not attempt to fix any time arbitrarily, but say on the first of October—a statement shall be made of all contributions and expenditures up to that time. I will not say that it is necessary to include small contributions, so small that they may be assumed to come from persons animated by patriotism and by a general interest in the subject under discussion. The minimum should be fixed. That limit should not be so high as to permit any great contributions to be made, or any amount that would raise the suspicion of a pecuniary interest to be subserved. Then, say, ten days before the election there should be filed a supplemental statement giving the contributions up to that time, and expenditures, and it should be unlawful for any person to make a contribution after the last day of publication.

Now, I believe that if in our plan we include the publication of these sums, say, thirty days, and then ten days before, and then make it a penal offense for any person to subscribe to any campaign fund after that time, we will meet the most difficult part of this question. After the election there would be the final statement that would include the expenditures after the last day, for, to my mind, the expenditures are not so important as the contributions. You can not spend money until you get it, and the source from which you get it is, to my mind, all important. It is very much easier to correct evils in the spending of money than in the collection of money.

There is just one other thought on this question. I do not believe in doing things half-way. If honesty in politics is the object desired, then there ought to be no half-way measures.

And I suggest this additional thought, namely, that the notice of contributions shall be given not only by the committee which receives them, but by the person who contributes. I would require, if I had my way about it, that every person who made a contribution to a campaign fund above the minimum, so much that the law declared his contribution should be known, within a very brief period of time after the contribution was made, file a statement, of it, either at his home postoffice, or at the United States court, or at some fixed place; so that you would have two methods. In

all our treasury departments and in the payments of money we have checks one on the other, and I think that this is a good place for the check. We ought to have the committee's statement when it receives the money, and the man's when he contributes it, and in that way we will have the one testifying against the other.

And then I would make it a criminal offense if the man who contributed or the committee who received it, did not make the statement. And, my friends, nothing but the criminal law is going to be sufficient. But if we provide that it shall be a penal offense for giving without notice, and a penal offense for a committee to receive without giving notice of it, I believe we will go to the root of the matter.

There may be differences as to the best thing to do, but, my friends, when the people want this done they will do the best thing that is proposed. When you give the presumption to the people in favor of honest government you will not hesitate to make laws strong enough and clear enough so that the people can know who is enough interested in any particular success to put up large sums of money to secure a victory.

When you have stopped the purchase of legislation from legislatures, and the purchase of immunity from executive officers, reforms will be possible. We may differ as to what reforms are necessary; but there ought to be no difference on this proposition—that the people have a right to do what they want in government, whether they want what I want or what you want. Republicans and democrats and all parties, if they believe in our theory of government, ought to believe that no matter how honestly or how deeply we may differ in opinion, we ought to be willing to let the people have what they want in government. Let the people rule; and if the people make mistakes remember that the people have a right to make mistakes. Most of the bad government in the past has arisen from the idea that a few people ought to be allowed to make the mistakes for the rest. Let the people make their own mistakes, and you will find that the majority will rectify them. We can get before them measures of reform, we can try to persuade them to accept that which we believe to be the best reform, but back of every man who speaks and every man who votes there ought to be the patriotic sentiment that prefers the triumph of that which is right to that which he may think to be right, if he is in fact wrong.

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