

Governor Johnson and the Tonnage Tax

Duluth, Minn., July 26.—Editor of The Commoner: In response to your invitation to Minnesota democrats to discuss Governor Johnson and his veto of the tonnage tax, I desire to say a few words. I see The Commoner of July 16 contains a communication from Judge Alfred Jaques of this city defending the governor in his veto of the tonnage tax. The judge says he considers the governor's act in vetoing this bill a patriotic, clear-headed and statesmanlike act. He also says that all the democrats of Duluth stand by the governor on this veto as one man. The judge says, and it is repeated in the Duluth Evening Herald of July 19, that the tonnage tax plank was "sneaked" into the democratic state platform and that few of the delegates knew of such a plank and that none of the St. Louis county delegates knew of it. The judge is a good fellow and a good democrat, but he has another guess coming if he thinks that Duluth democrats are going to swallow that cold storage "dope" from the governor's kitchen cabinet.

As I understand the question, The Commoner wants to know how far a candidate can go in repudiating the platform of his party after he has been elected on it; or whether the candidate after election can decide for himself what part of the platform he will accept and what part he may reject; or in other words, if the platform is not binding on a candidate, why should the party have a platform? That is to say, is it right for a candidate to stand on a platform, with his hands behind him, and his fingers crossed?

Now let us see if this plank was "sneaked" into the platform. The facts do not quite bear out the judge's contention on this point. The Evening Herald also seems to be willing to be misinformed, although it had a representative at that convention. The convention was held at Minneapolis on August 17, 1908. After the convention was organized and the various committees appointed, the committee on platform was in conference for more than an hour, although the governor's kitchen cabinet had thoughtfully provided the committee with a ready-made draft of the platform. Among the members of the committee which reported the platform were such good democratic democrats as: Judge H. L. Buck of Winona, who was chairman of the democratic state central committee from 1902 to 1904 and chairman of the Minnesota delegation to the St. Louis national convention of 1904. Another was Hon. T. J. Knox of Jackson, who was a member of the railroad and warehouse commission of Minnesota by appointment of Governor John Lind and was afterwards appointed by the supreme court of Minnesota to revise the statutes of the state. Another was Hon. T. J. Meighen of Preston, who was a candidate for lieutenant governor on the ticket with John Lind in 1900 and was the Minnesota member of the populist national committee for many years. You couldn't "sneak in" a whole lot on such fellows. If any one believes that Judge Jaques knows what he was talking about when he said the tonnage tax plank was "sneaked" into the democratic state platform last year, he could probably have his mind relieved of any such notion by writing any of the gentlemen named above. And curiously enough, there were some members of the delegation from this county to that convention who heard the tonnage tax plank read by the Hon. T. D. O'Brien, chairman of the committee on resolutions, and they made no objection to it at the time. Some of them probably thought it was right, and others on the delegation were possibly more interested in holding the jobs to which the governor had appointed them, and made no objection to the plank because they thought it would make the governor thousands of votes in southern and western Minnesota. The judge rather disqualifies himself as a witness by admitting that he wasn't in the convention, which some of the boys here think is about the same as saying that the judge admits he doesn't know what he was talking about. I think we will have to disqualify the judge on the ground that his testimony is hardly good enough to be called even "hearsay."

Of course, there may have been some delegates from this county who could not understand the platform when it was read, like some of the republican Finlanders that were sent down from Floodwood with the help of one of the governor's appointees and the republican

politicians of that town. Maybe the judge has gotten these fellows mixed up with that tonnage tax plank on the "sneak in" proposition.

Every democrat at the convention who could understand the English language either heard Tom O'Brien read the tonnage tax plank before the platform was adopted, or had an opportunity to read it in a newspaper before the governor accepted his nomination. And more than that, practically every newspaper in the state, outside of the iron district, claimed that the governor favored the tonnage tax and the governor advocated it publicly in his campaign of the state. If Judge Jaques can get any satisfaction out of the fact that the governor carried this county by the biggest majority that any democrat ever got in the county in which the steel trust has more men employed than in all the other counties of the state put together, it is up to him and the democrats of the southern part of the state to get together on who was handed the gold brick.

Now let us see how the thing worked out down in southern Minnesota in the farming districts. The impression had gotten abroad down there that the governor had been a little too friendly to the great steel trust. A year or two previous, it was reported, the governor had gone before the state board of equalization and protested against a raise of the valuation of the steel trust holdings from sixty millions of dollars that was placed on it by the board of equalization of St. Louis county to seventy millions that was put on by the state board of equalization. In other words the state board increased the valuation ten millions of dollars, making it a total of seventy millions, and to this increase the governor strenuously objected in executive session. As an evidence that the seventy millions was not an exorbitant valuation, I will just submit what transpired a short time afterwards. At the next session of the legislature after this controversy about valuations, a law was passed creating what is known as a tax commission, composed of three members. This commission, in revising the valuations of property throughout the state, put a valuation of one hundred and ninety-two millions on the same property that the governor thought was valued too high when it was put at seventy millions. This commission held several sessions. The attorneys for the steel trust, the local officers of the steel corporation, and the county auditor of St. Louis county appeared before this commission, and most of these officials stated that one hundred and twenty-five or fifty millions would be a proper and just valuation to place upon the steel corporation holdings. But the tax commission's figures stuck, and the steel trust never cared to put the governor in a hole by giving the courts a chance to hold that the governor got off about a hundred and thirty millions in his figures, and got off on the other side from where we common people were standing around.

So something had to be done among the farmers in southern Minnesota to offset this record. So the governor's friends on the stump during the campaign and such papers as were supporting him in southern Minnesota, all pointed with pride to that plank in the platform favoring a tonnage tax. And by reason of the publicity that was given this particular plank, John A. Johnson received thousands of votes, and in all probability that plank more than any other one thing enabled him to get votes enough to succeed himself as governor of Minnesota. L. R. Johnson and his friends went about the southern part of the state and assured the voters that such a plank was proper, just and right. The governor and his friends could not help but know that he was getting a tremendous support, regardless of party, just on account of this plank that was not "sneaked in." Let us suppose a case. Suppose the governor during the campaign in his speeches throughout the state had taken up the platform and discussed it plank after plank, and had taken the voters into his confidence, and told them that he would not be bound by the platform, or at least that part of it containing the tonnage tax plank; but what's the use of supposing? The governor did nothing of the kind. On the contrary, like our distinguished president, he allowed the voters to believe that he was running on the platform of his party as they understood it.

If Mr. Johnson had stated that he would veto the tonnage tax bill, and if Mr. Taft had told

the people that he favored a tariff that went up instead of a tariff that went down, I venture to say that at this time both Mr. Johnson and Mr. Taft would be entirely free from great official cares. And after all if a candidate is not bound by a platform after election, as well as before election, again I repeat, why should we have platforms? Will the judge, or Evening Herald, or somebody please answer? The governor and those who try to vindicate him speak of the tonnage tax as an unjust tax. The governor in his veto says it is not the proper way to levy a tax, but the majority of both houses of the legislature thought otherwise, so after all, the justice of it seems to be a matter of opinion. The governor gives as another reason for his veto that such a tax would be unconstitutional. The governor is not a lawyer, and his experience in deciding constitutional questions has been rather limited, although he did turn down John Lind on such a question when Lind was governor. Those are matters that are usually left to the supreme court of the state, but it seems in this particular case that the governor beat the supreme court to it. If Johnson intended to repudiate the tonnage tax plank of his platform, he ought to have run on a telegram like Parker did.

Now I do not care to discuss whether or not the tonnage tax is a proper and lawful tax, but it is very important that each individual and each corporation should bear its just proportion of the burden of taxation. It matters little as to how such a tax is levied. I venture to say that there is not five per cent of the people in St. Louis county and Duluth that would know from their taxes whether we had a tonnage tax or not. The tonnage tax would not affect the average citizen one way or the other, but it would make a tremendous difference to the steel trust and other large holders of iron ore lands. The steel trust like all other large corporations have stimulated and helped to develop this part of the state, but their efforts have been entirely in the interests of the steel trust. Any incidental benefits that others may have received from it are merely crumbs that have fallen from the table.

In the early days of the steel trust it was known as the Minnesota Iron company. At that time they operated on the Vermillion range only. The great Missabe range was discovered a few years later. The steel trust has imported into this country a very undesirable class of citizens, mostly Montenegrins and people from the Balkan states and southern Europe. Those people, as a rule, do not speak our language, and they do not want to. More than half of them are not citizens and do not desire to become citizens. They have nothing in common with us. They are only waiting the time when they can accumulate enough money to go back to the country whence they came. A large percentage of those who have become citizens feel their citizenship is a farce. They have not been allowed to exercise it free and untrammelled as is the intent of our law, but they have been voted like cattle. Up until quite recently on election day those miners were provided with a little red ticket with the following printed on it: "I am unable to read, write, or talk the English language. I want to vote the straight republican ticket." The little red ticket was given by the elector to one of the judges of election and the judges of election were mostly mining captains and clerks from the local mining offices. It was not always a fact that a man holding one of those famous red tickets could not speak English, nor was it always a fact that he wanted to vote the straight republican ticket, but the little red ticket sort of systematizes things, and it enabled the officials of the steel trust who are acting as judges of elections to make such an election almost unanimous. It also enables them to show a very high average for the g. o. p. in this part of the state. However, the iron companies have not always been strictly orthodox in their politics. Sometimes they deviate from the rule and make exceptions. A few years ago R. S. Munger of this city had aspirations for the state senate. Mr. Munger was at that time a very staunch republican. A man of splendid attainments, and in every way fitted to fill the position to which he aspired, but he was not satisfactory to the powers that be, and in his stead they elected a democrat, one Alonzo J. Whitman, who is at this time serving a long term in the penitentiary in the state of New York. So you see