

Seniority a Vicious System

The St. Louis Republic prints the following editorial: Organization by seniority is stand-patism both in principle and practice. By seniority Aldrich became chairman of the senate's finance committee. By seniority Hale and Lodge and Gallinger and Penrose were given important committee appointments and the Aldrich machine built up and maintained. Young or new members coming into the senate quickly realized that they could only reach places of power by marking time, doing the controlling clique's bidding, playing the game according to the rules. Now and then one rebelled. Mostly they fell into line and became, not senators, but apprentices to the Aldrich senate machine.

Seniority made Joseph G. Cannon speaker of the house. It made Payne chairman of the ways and means committee and Tawney chairman of appropriations. It made first lieutenants of Watson, Dalzell, McKinley, Mann. In short, it created the Cannon cabal. In the end it wrecked the republican party.

Preferment by seniority will wreck the democratic party or any other party that slavishly follows it. If there are democrats, either in senate or house, who do not voice the party sentiment of the times and who would be at odds with the spirit of the administration their promotion would be a popular affront and a party misfortune. Other things being equal, seniority is entitled to preference. But there is no valid claim for command in years of officeholding. The senator or representative who has fallen out of step with his party has forfeited his right to leadership.

Upon the principle of fitness, from the viewpoints of democracy and capacity, the senate and house should be organized. Mr. Bryan is right in opposing the vicious practice of seniority awards. It makes inevitably for oligarchy. And after that the deluge.

RULE BY SENIORITY

There can be little doubt as to the sympathy of the president-elect with the protest made by Mr. Bryan in his journal against "the blight of seniority" which threatens to wreck the committees of the next congress.

It is strange how standpatism persists in an age of insurgency, militant progressivism and political upheavals. Mr. Wilson has had much to say about the new era and its fine conceptions of duty and service. He certainly will not acquiesce in the subordination of the general welfare to individual ambitions or pretensions.

The rule of mere seniority in committee assignments is a survival of the bad old regime of spoils and stratagems. The claims of hold-over members should rest on fitness, on experience, on efficiency. As Mr. Bryan says, changes in rules will be of slight advantage unless the men who apply the new rules are the right men in the right places.

Mr. Bryan may have his own definitions of progressivism, and Mr. Wilson may not fully accept these definitions. The point of an observation may lie in its application. But the principle of freedom in selecting committeemen and in tempering the tyranny of seniority is unquestionably sound. The democratic party will have to put its best foot forward, to choose wise, enlightened leaders, and maintain a rather unusual measure of discipline. Its responsibilities are heavy, its dangers not small. Much will depend on the relations between the executive and congress, and these relations will largely depend on the personnel of the important committees. Experience is valuable, but it is not everything. An experienced reactionary or trimmer out of sympathy with new tendencies would be the more undesirable because of his acquired skill.—Chicago Record-Herald.

WEAK IN NUMBER—CHOICE IN QUALITY

The reactionaries are a very small portion of the democratic party, yet they are of that quality of fineness that they feel the whole of the democratic party belongs to them. They think that the progressive democrats have nothing else to do but to vote and win the victories for them that they alone may enjoy the emoluments of office and the honors of official station.

The democratic party is progressive in its principles and purposes, as expressed in its platform pronouncements and as indicated by the men placed in command, yet those of the reactionary faction, which is a very small fragmentary and decadent element, assume to be the

only real democrats—the very salt of the earth—and they feel that all others should stand aside for them. They feel that as they are the whole show, all the rest of the democratic party should stand aside and let them have everything in sight.

From the viewpoint of the reactionaries the progressives are unworthy of confidence, and, though the latter are in control of the party by virtue of the expressed choice of the party majority, the former claim that owing to their superior party sanctity they ought to be preferred to all others.

Bryan's Commoner has evidently been impressed with the attitude of the reactionaries, as in large black type is stretched across the top of that this paper this tart declaration:

"The reactionary democrats can understand why no progressive should receive any office under the administration of President Wilson, but they can not understand why a progressive should object to a reactionary for anything."

While a very small per cent of the democratic party are reactionaries, they are strong in the faith, believing as they do that they constitute the better portion of their party, and they have no hesitancy in expressing a priority of claim on the loaves and fishes. It matters not if Woodrow Wilson himself and the rest of the great leaders are progressives, the reactionaries imagine their quality will outweigh all else besides and that they will be placed in possession of the offices if it should turn out that there is enough to go around.—Nashville Tennessean.

ATTACK ON THE SENIORITY RULE

The old custom of seniority rule in committee assignments in congress, which many believe would be more honored in their breach than in their observance, is now about to be put to a severe test as an attack is being made on the practice by those who stand with the majority element of the democratic party in the federal congress.

Mr. Bryan, in his Commoner, boldly states that there is no courtesy which should be stronger than the obligations of a public official to his constituents, and that assignments to committees should be made upon the basis of fitness and with a view to giving faithful expression to the will of the majority.

The New York Times expresses apprehension over this declaration, asking Mr. Bryan if he means by this a declaration of war.

In reply to the Times' anxious query, the Springfield Republican pertinently says that, on the contrary, it means that the organization of congress should be in the hands of those who really dominate party sentiment in that body, and that "to be specific—and the practical question simmers down to a few specific questions—why should the chairmanship of the senate finance committee be given to a semi-protectionist like Mr. Simmons of North Carolina because of seniority when the majority of the senate democrats hold views of a different sort?"

Here is the position of the progressive democrats, as succinctly stated by Mr. Bryan:

"The democratic victory of 1912 brings in another group of new democrats, all of them progressives. The progressive democrats will now be in the majority in the senate caucus. Will they allow a reactionary minority to man the ship? Will they allow length of service to outweigh sympathy with the progressive cause?"

"If it were a personal matter, the new senators might prefer to yield to the older ones, but a man who acts in a representative capacity is not at liberty to be courteous at the expense of his constituents. The democrats of the organization represent the prevailing sentiment in the party, and thus enable it to work in harmony with the administration. To do this, the rule of seniority should be ignored. Assignments to committees should be made upon the basis of fitness and with a view to giving faithful expression to the will of the majority. * * *

"The democratic party is pledged to the doctrine of representative government. The doctrine of seniority is destructive of both the theory and the practice of representative government."

"There is no use to become unduly excited over Mr. Bryan's advice to congress and to the democratic party, when that advice is based on common sense and common equity. It would be the merest folly to place the power of control in the hands of those who represent the minority of the party, when the questions to be considered and which make the difference between democrats,

are of vital importance to the party and the country.

The point is plainly, clearly, and strongly made by the Springfield Republican that no man has a legitimate claim upon an important committee chairmanship if he does not faithfully represent the dominant purpose of his party.

Obviously, what the majority element of the democratic party contends for is to control to that extent that the spirit of the party in all essential things may prevail, and that this may be they can not allow the length of service to outweigh sympathy with the progressive cause.—Nashville Tennessean.

The rules under which the senate has been operating give certain senators what amounts to a vested right in committee appointments. The influence of committees, particularly chairmen of committees, as Senator Dolliver showed in one of his very last speeches in the senate, is very great—much too great in a representative assembly.

The practice has been to put new senators, no matter what their special fitness, upon the least important committees and to make them chairmen of committees which have little or nothing and nothing important, to do. Senator La Follette, for instance, than whom there is no man in the senate better informed on a larger variety of subjects, was made chairman of the committee on the Potomac river, or something of the kind, but a committee, at any rate, that never had occasion to meet. In the assignment of committee rooms, Senator La Follette was given one down in the basement, reached from the sumptuously furnished rooms of the committee on appropriations by going down on an elevator and walking through dark and winding passages and through an engine room.

The new senator progresses not by fitness or ability, but as the death or retirement of senators older in the service than he opens the way to him.—Dubuque (Ia.) Telegraph-Herald.

A NEW YORKER AGITATED

Columbia (S. C.) "The State": "We take it," says the New York Times, "that Mr. Bryan is not going to be a member of President Wilson's cabinet. The evidence is inferential, but it can not be disregarded."

The Times then quotes as the important "inferential" evidence an editorial in the current issue of The Commoner in which Mr. Bryan says:

"The democratic party is going to have another struggle in both senate and house over committee assignments and is again threatened with the blight of seniority, that is, it will be asked to put the ambitions and interests of individuals above the welfare of the party.

"The progressive democrats will now be in the majority in the senate caucus. Will they allow a reactionary minority to man the ship? Will they allow length of service to outweigh sympathy with the progressive cause? * * * The democrats of the senate owe it to the party to make the senate organization represent the prevailing sentiment of the party, and thus enable it to work in harmony with the administration. To do this the rule of seniority should be ignored. Assignments to committee should be made upon the basis of fitness and with a view to giving faithful expression to the will of the majority."

"It is very evident that Mr. Bryan's Commoner article means war. It is war." That is the analysis of our New York contemporary, which continues in this strain:

"It is impossible to affirm upon information that The Commoner article is the fruit of anything said or not said at the Trenton interview, or that it was provoked by the report of the speaker's attitude. But if Mr. Bryan had been invited into the cabinet, or if he still entertained the hope that he would be a member of the cabinet, it is not conceivable that he would now try to set the democrats by the ears in both houses of congress, substitute factional discord for union and harmony, and to the extent of his influence try to ruin the administration of which he was to be a part."

It is "impossible to affirm on information that The Commoner article is the fruit of anything said or not said at the Trenton interview," but it is not impossible to affirm on information that the Times is wholly wrong in its suggestions.

In taking the position in his paper that reactionaries should not have undue influence in legislation simply because seniority in congress places them, under the rules of precedent, at the head of committees, Mr. Bryan is exercising the double prerogative of a citizen member of the democratic party and the editor of a public

305 FC73 v. 13 1913