

# The Commoner

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## PROGRESS ON TOLLS AMENDMENT

Since the last issue of The Commoner the measure providing for the repeal of free tolls has made progress. The senate committee on interoceanic canals has had extended hearings and the bill has been reported to the senate. Owing to divisions in the committee it made no recommendation.

The committee added an amendment which specifically reserves all rights of the United States. The language of the amendment is as follows:

"Provided, That neither the passage of this act nor anything therein contained shall be construed or held as waiving, impairing, or affecting any treaty or other right possessed by the United States."

Those who support repeal are divided into several groups. The members of one group believe that free tolls would be a violation of treaty stipulations; the members of the second group are in doubt as to the correct interpretation of the treaty and prefer to leave the question for future determination. The members of still another group believe that free tolls would not violate the treaty, but oppose free tolls either because of their opposition to subsidies or for some other economic reason. The members of the fourth group believe that free tolls may be permissible under the treaty, and may, under certain circumstances, be wise, but think that there should be no attempt at this time to give this advantage to American ships.

A majority of those who favor repeal of free tolls law dispute the theory that the measure, as it passed the house, could be construed as a surrender of any rights which the government may have, but they favor the amendment as a concession to those who entertain doubts upon the subject. The amendment is unobjectionable from every standpoint and is defensible as a means of increasing the support of the measure. As the repeal measure would not, of itself, operate as a construction of the treaty, or as a surrender of any rights given by the treaty, no harm can be done by such a specific reservation as is made by the amendment.

The proposed amendment can, therefore, be regarded as helpful to the passage of the bill.

The only other proposition worthy of consideration is the resolution offered by Senator Borah, which reads as follows:

"Whereas, The three political parties now represented in the executive and legislative departments of the government, and which alone will have to do with pending legislation, went before the voters in the last national campaign solemnly committed to the policy and the justice of exemption of tolls from American vessels engaged in coastwise trade; and

"Whereas, The three candidates for the presidency of each of said political parties individually declared in favor of the justice and wisdom of such policy; and

"Whereas, It is now deemed by some the part of wisdom, notwithstanding such pledges and

platforms, to impose tolls upon American vessels engaged in coastwise trade; and

"Whereas, National honor and the fundamental principles of representative government require that we deal in the utmost good faith with the electorate, and that all public servants carry out the pledges solemnly made to the people and upon and by reason of which pledges they are delegated to act for the people; and

"Whereas, At the approaching November election the entire house of representatives and thirty-two members of the senate are to be elected, all of whom must be elected by popular vote; and

"Whereas, In this way a referendum for all practical purposes may be had upon this important question heretofore submitted to the people; and

"Whereas, No injury of any moment can possibly arise or be incurred by reason of delaying the passage of this bill for the next few months; Therefore, be it

"Resolved, That a vote upon House Bill No. 14385, providing for the repeal of that portion of the act of August 21, 1912, providing for the exemption of tolls upon vessels engaged in coastwise trade shall be postponed until after the convening of congress, December 7, 1914, to the end that this matter may again be submitted to the voters of the United States whose right and privilege it is to finally determine this question."

This resolution is not likely to change the situation or to cause any re-alignment among the senators, but it may not be out of place to suggest two objections to the resolution which have doubtless occurred to the friends of the repeal measure.

First. The proposition comes from an opponent of the measure. He desires to defeat it, and therefore grasps at anything that can, by any possibility, contribute to the carrying out of his desire. His own attitude may rightly be considered in the discussion of the matter. If the resolution came from one who would be influenced by the result of the election or was in doubt and desired information as to public opinion, it might be more deserving of support. But Senator Borah is not seeking information

on the subject; his mind is fully made up, and there is no reason to believe that he will be influenced in his vote by the result of the coming congressional election for reasons that will be set forth in the discussion of the second objection.

The second objection is that a referendum is impossible. The word referendum can properly apply only when a definite proposition is submitted to the people for approval or disapproval, as in the case of a constitutional amendment, a statute, an issue of bonds, etc. We have no provision for the submission of the tolls question or any other question to a vote of the people. No matter which way the congressional election goes, it would be absurd to regard the result as indicating approval or disapproval of any particular measure enacted or before congress. The candidates for the United States senate and for the house of representatives will run as democrats, republicans or progressive republicans, or as representatives of other parties, and a considerable percentage, if not a majority, of the votes cast for each candidate will be due to that candidate's party affiliations, and not to his attitude on any particular question.

Then, too, each candidate will represent a number of issues upon which the voters may desire to express themselves. Some will regard one question as paramount while others will consider another as more important. Take the case of Senator Borah, for instance. He will doubtless make speeches during the congressional campaign, and in his speeches he will deal with a number of issues. He voted against the democratic tariff bill, and he is not likely to lose an opportunity to explain why he voted against it and to give his objections to the measure which the democrats enacted. He also voted against the currency reform bill, and he will be under some compulsion to discuss that. The trust bills are soon to come before the senate, and upon these he must take a position for or against the administration. The president's foreign policy will also be a subject for discussion, and upon this Senator Borah, as a member of the foreign relations committee, cannot be silent. He will, of course, discuss the tolls question along with other questions, but no one can say whether the votes which he influences, to the extent that he may influence votes, will be influenced by what he says on the tolls question; or by what he says on the currency question; or by what he says on the tariff question; or by what he says on the trust question; or by what he says on the question of the president's foreign policy; or by what he says regarding the many other questions which are likely to be discussed.

If, by any possibility, the republicans succeed in controlling the next congress, it will be interesting to read the editorials in republican papers and the interviews which will be given out by

### CONTENTS.

PROGRESS ON TOLLS AMENDMENT
MEDIATION IN THE MEXICAN CRISIS
A CAMPAIGN IS APPROACHING
ELECT A DEMOCRATIC CONGRESS
PRESIDENT WILSON'S TRIBUTE TO COUNTRY'S DEAD
SOMETHING NEW IN CONSERVATION
"SALUTING THE FLAG" IN HISTORY
PRESIDENT WILSON ON MEXICAN AFFAIRS.
WORK OF THE PRESIDENT'S CABINET
CURRENT TOPICS