

The Commoner.

WILLIAM J. BRYAN, EDITOR AND PROPRIETOR.

Vol. 4. No. 27.

Lincoln, Nebraska, July 22, 1904.

Whole No. 183.

DEMOCRACY MUST MOVE FORWARD

My selection as standard-bearer of the democratic party in 1896 and again in 1900 made me the nominal leader of that party, and as such I did not feel at liberty to engraft new doctrines upon the party creed. I contented myself with the defense of those principles and policies which were embodied in the platform. Now, that the leadership devolves upon another and I bear only the responsibility that each citizen must bear, namely, responsibility for my opinions, my utterances and my conduct, I am free to undertake a work which until now I have avoided, namely, the work of organizing the radical and progressive element in the democratic party.

The money question is for the present in abeyance. The increased production of gold has lessened the strain upon the dollar and while bimetalism is as sound in theory as it ever was, the necessity for it is not so apparent. I believe that the time will come when the people will again turn to bimetalism and reject the gold standard, but this period will not come while times are good and while the advocates of the gold standard can point to a reasonably sufficient supply of money. Of course, it is absurd for those who said that we had money enough in 1896 to point with pride to a large increase since 1896, but inconsistent as it is they do so and as the present enlarged volume of money brings, in part at least, the advantages hoped for from bimetalism, it is useless to press the subject of bimetalism for the present. While the advocates of the gold standard intend a crusade against the silver now in circulation, they do not openly proclaim it, and we must wait until they attempt to carry out their purpose before the people can be awakened to a realization of that purpose. The advocates of the gold standard intend to withdraw the greenback from circulation and to substitute bank notes, but as they do not proclaim their purpose we must await an object lesson before the people will understand it. The advocates of the gold standard intend to substitute an asset currency for the present national bank currency, but they do not proclaim their purpose and until they attempt it the people cannot be made to understand it. The advocates of the gold standard intend to establish a branch bank system such as Jackson overthrew, but as they do not announce their purpose the people do not see it and will not see it until some open and overt attempt is made.

Time will open the eyes of the people and events will reveal the purposes of the financial group that has its home in Wall street and makes forays against the country as often and as rapidly as care for their own safety will permit.

But while the people cannot be brought at this time to consider the various phases of the money question, they can be brought to consider certain other questions with which the democratic party must deal. I have heretofore refused to take a position upon the question of the government ownership of railroads, first, because I had not until recently studied the subject, and, second, because the question had not been reached. Recent events have convinced me that the time is now ripe for the presentation of this question. Consolidation after consolidation has taken place until a few men now control the railroad traffic of the country and defy both the legislative and the executive power of the nation. I invite the democrats, therefore, to consider a plan for the government ownership and operation of the railroads.

The plan usually suggested is for the purchase of these roads by the federal government. This plan, it seems to me, is more objectionable than a plan which involves the ownership and operation of these roads by the several states. To put the railroads in the hands of the federal government would mean an enormous centralization of power. It would give to the federal government a largely increased influence over the citizen and the citizen's affairs, and such centralization is not at all necessary. The several

states can own and operate the railroads within their borders just as effectively as it can be done by the federal government and if it is done by the states the objection based upon the fear of centralization is entirely answered. A board composed of representatives from the various states could deal with interstate traffic just as freight and passenger boards now deal with the joint traffic of the various lines. If the federal government had the railroads to build there would be a constant warring between different sections to secure a fair share of the new building and development, but where this is left to the state the people in each state can decide what railroads they desire to build or to buy. The maintenance of the track, the care of the stations, the handling of incoming and outgoing freight and passengers—all these things require the employment of men, and if the employment is left to state authorities instead of to national authorities, most of the objections that have been raised to government ownership will be answered.

The arguments in favor of the assumption of the ownership and operation of railroads by the government are numerous:

First—Extortionate rates would be prevented. So far it has been impossible to secure any real regulation of railroad rates. The railroads regulate the government instead of the government the railroads. When the government owns the railroads and operates them, there can be no question about the fixing of reasonable tolls.

Second—Discrimination would be prevented. At present the railroad authorities can kill one town and build up another, destroy one locality and enrich another. And these discriminations are not always made out of consideration for the interests of the railroad, but are sometimes made because of the investments of officials in the town or locality to be favored. Great injustice has been done by these discriminations, and no way has been found to prevent them.

But there is another kind of discrimination which is operating against the nation's welfare and progress, namely, the discrimination in favor of the large city as against the small one. To the railroads more than any other influence is due the fact that the population is being driven from the country to the city. With fair and impartial rates the small town might again hope to be the home of the small factory, and those people who are being crowded into the cities where they live without the economic, sanitary, intellectual and moral advantages which they deserve, would be scattered more evenly throughout the country to their own great benefit and to the nation's good.

Third—The politics of the nation is being debauched by money. This money is drawn from the great corporations that desire special privileges or immunity from punishment, and is used to corrupt not only the voters, but legislatures. How can this corruption be stopped so long as enormous wealth can be made by watered stock and by the exploitation of the public? The railroad is to a certain extent a monopoly. As soon as a line is built between two points the field is occupied and it is impossible to have competition. If a second road is built for the purpose of securing competition, the traffic between the two terminals must support two roads instead of one, and it is impossible for two roads to carry the passengers and the freight at as low a cost as the one road could. This being true, the result usually is that the competing lines are soon consolidated and the attempt at competition given up. Legislation has been attempted against consolidation, but so far such legislation has been very ineffectual. The benefits to be derived by the railroads from the destruction of competition are so enormous that they have thus far been able to protect themselves by the giving up of a small part of the benefit to those who are in a position to interfere with them, but whose views can be modified by an argument addressed to the pocket-book.

Fourth—Another objection to the private ownership of railroads has been forced upon me with

increasing emphasis during the last few years, namely, the corrupting influence of these great railway corporations over the young professional men of the country. The railroads have lawyers in every county and general attorneys at every state capital. These men stand high in their profession and are usually men of character. Their connection with the railroad has in many instances made them not merely the attorneys for the road in legal matters, but lobbyists for the road in political matters. These men have controlled conventions, dictated nominations, written platforms and so shaped appointments that the masses have been ignored and their interests disregarded. The United States senate today contains so many men who are obliged to the railroads that it has been impossible to secure an amendment of the interstate commerce law, although for years the interstate commerce commission, composed of both republicans and democrats, has been pleading for an amendment.

It is not necessary to believe that United States senators actually draw salaries from these railroads at the same time that they draw salaries from the government, although it is known that salaries have been offered to senators by railroads having business before that body, and it is known today that there are men there who did receive salaries from railroads just before their election and it is not known that those salaries have been relinquished.

If the railroads were owned by the several states instead of by private corporations, the railroad officials would be selected by the people and responsible to the people, whereas now these attorneys are selected by the railroads, paid by the railroads and subservient to the railroads.

Fifth—Another objection to the private ownership of railroads—and it is an objection that all recognize—is the use of the pass in politics. In some of the states the constitution forbids the use of a pass by public officials, but even in such states officials sometimes use passes and when an official in such a state accepts a pass, having violated the law, he puts himself where the railroad can blackmail him and force him to vote for measures desired by the railroads.

So powerful is the influence of the pass that it was impossible to secure at the last session of congress consideration of a resolution introduced by Congressman Baker of New York asking whether the giving of a pass was a violation of the interstate commerce law. The Pennsylvania railroad and the Baltimore & Ohio road secured large appropriations from the last congress for the enlargement of the depot facilities at Washington, and it is a notorious fact that representatives of the roads were present in the lobbies of the capitol building giving passes to the members of congress who voted with them and refusing passes to the members who voted against their demands. Any one who has had any experience in politics cannot be blind to the fact that the use of the pass often controls conventions, determines the selection of legislators, governors and often judges. When the recipient acts upon questions that involve the interests of the people, either his mind must be influenced by favors received or he must constantly brace himself against that influence. These are some, not all, of the reasons that may be given in favor of the government ownership and operation of the railroads. By leaving the matter to the state each state can act for itself and be governed by the sentiment of the people, moving as slowly or as rapidly as that sentiment demands. But I feel assured that the time has come when the democratic party as a party should turn its face toward the solution of this great question, and by the advocacy of the government ownership of the railroads bring to the people relief from the economic evils that have followed private ownership, and relief from the political corruption which seems indissolubly connected with the private ownership of railroads.

Whether the various roads shall be secured by purchase or condemnation is a matter that