

Mr. Bryan at Omaha

I am here to speak upon the political situation in Nebraska, and I have asked for a hearing at this time because I am just leaving for an absence of nearly six weeks. If I were going to be at home I would have delayed speaking on this subject for two or three weeks, but it may be just as well to speak now as later.

Let me in the first place answer a few criticisms. It has been charged that I am attempting to dictate to the democratic party. No one can fairly make that charge. I have no disposition to dictate, and have no means of enforcing a command if I desired to issue one, but I am a member of the democratic party, I am a citizen of the state of Nebraska, and besides being in duty bound to meet the responsibilities of a democrat and the responsibilities of a citizen, I am also bound to meet those higher responsibilities that rest upon us as moral beings. I think you will agree with me that I have as much interest in the democratic party as any other member of the party, and if any of you think that my course jeopardizes democratic success I think you will not deny that I have as much interest in democratic success as any other member of the party. Even those who are candidates for office are not personally interested in its success more than I am, for in the national work I am trying to do I would be embarrassed by the defeat of the party in this state, especially if the responsibility for the defeat could be fairly placed upon me. I think you will agree also that as a citizen of the state I have as deep an interest in the welfare of the state as any other citizen. I am as closely identified with this state's standing, with its welfare and with its progress as any other member of the party. I am a taxpayer in the state of Nebraska and can not be indifferent to anything that affects the state.

As an individual I have my responsibility as well as others, and I have no more right to dodge a question that is ready for settlement than you have.

When I returned to the state after an absence of some months I found a condition here that I had not expected to find. I had announced my position on the subject of county option and had said before leaving that it was an issue that could not be avoided unless the initiative and referendum was submitted by a special session, and the submission of the initiative and referendum only avoids the issue because it presents a larger issue and one which includes county option together with other issues. Under the initiative and referendum any question upon which the people desire to act can be submitted at the polls. If we have the initiative and referendum submitted we can work this fall for the adoption of the amendment and when it is adopted we can take up any question upon which the people desire to act. When I reached Nebraska I found that the special session had not been called because the canvass made did not assure the success of the amendment. I found that the liquor interests which controlled enough members of the senate to prevent the submission of the initiative and referendum were insisting that the county option question should not be made a state issue. They wanted to have the state organization of both the leading parties against county option, and their argument was that the matter should be left to the districts, but I found that these same liquor interests were at work secretly, selecting candidates for the state senate with a view to controlling that body. I found that representatives of the national liquor organization had been in the state, and that they had tried to arrange for the selection of senatorial candidates. I found that representatives of the local liquor interests were acting with the national organization and that the plan deliberately entered upon and industriously pursued was to secure enough state senators to prevent the carrying out of the wishes of the people. I found that certain special interests were combined with the brewers and that an offensive and defensive alliance had been formed, under the terms of which the special interests would act together to block any legislation to which they objected. Having fully informed myself and having secured evidence that is to my mind conclusive, I had to decide my duty as a democrat, as a citizen and as a man, and I announced that I would attempt to ascertain the sentiment of the democratic members of the legislature on the initiative and referendum, and would ask the direct legislation league to ascertain the position of the republicans on this proposition. I said that I had no doubt that the governor

would call a special session if assured of enough votes to pass the resolution submitting the initiative and referendum. I also announced at that time that in case the initiative and referendum was not submitted it would be necessary then to meet county option as a state issue, and that I was in favor of a platform declaration in favor of it. I at once addressed letters to the democratic senators and members of the legislature, and the Direct Legislation League has made inquiry of the republican members. While the poll is not yet complete it is certain that the resolution would have no difficulty in passing the house, but it is still doubtful whether it would pass the senate. Some of the senators who voted "no" are willing to vote "yes" in case they are asked to do so by a majority of their constituents, while other senators have declined to promise to vote for it even if petitioned to do so by a majority of the voters of their district. The governor has said that he would call this special session if he has written assurance of sufficient votes to pass the initiative and referendum resolution. I can not say yet whether the written assurance can be given, nor can I say whether the governor would feel justified in calling a special session upon the assurance that has been given. But whether the special session is called or not, I believe that the democrats of the state should know the political situation and understand the sordid influences which are attempting to dominate the politics of both parties.

If the special session is not called there is but one reason for it, and that is, that the opposition to the initiative and referendum, not in the house of representatives nor among the people, but solely in the state senate, is sufficient to prevent the submission of this amendment. Whether the senators who oppose the initiative and referendum represent the wishes of their constituents or not is really immaterial so far as the public is concerned. If these senators do not represent their constituents then the liquor interests are responsible for compelling the misrepresentation of these senatorial districts. If, however, the senators represent their constituents, then we must face a more serious proposition. The reason given by most of the senators who opposed the initiative and referendum was that their people are opposed to county option, and opposed to the initiative and referendum because it could be used for the submission of the question of county option. In other words, if these senators represent their constituents the men opposed to county option insist upon making it a paramount issue. As the initiative and referendum are intended to give the people a chance to vote on public questions the defeat of this proposition by those who are opposed to county option means that rather than have county option submitted they will prevent the submission of any question. If the liquor question must be disposed of before we can secure the initiative and referendum then the sooner we dispose of it the better, for we have no assurance that the liquor interests will be any more willing to have the initiative and referendum submitted by the next legislature than they are to have it submitted by the present legislature. We might as well prepare for the conflict and settle now the question whether a special pecuniary interest can control the policies of the parties of the states; silence conventions on important issues and then set up legislatures by secret manipulation. I for one am not willing that the democratic party shall go into the present campaign as the open and avowed representative of the liquor interests. I do not know how many of the democrats may agree with me. There is no way of finding out where our party stands unless a fight is made, and I am willing to be counted as one who protests whether those who agree with me are few or many. I believe that they are many, in fact, I believe that if the matter can be fairly presented to the democratic voters a large majority will record themselves as unalterably opposed to the domination of our party by the liquor interests. At least I will not admit until we are voted down in the convention or at a primary that a majority of the democrats are willing to take orders from the liquor dealers who have a pecuniary interest in opposing all restrictions and who have, in the past, opposed every important effort to limit the evils of the saloon.

The liquor interests have no politics. They are willing to act with any party they can control and against any party they can not control.

When Andrew Jackson was told by Nick Biddle that his bank could elect or defeat a president Jackson answered that if so it had more power than it ought to have and more than it would have in the future. And so we

say that if the liquor interests have power to defeat the initiative and referendum they have more power than they ought to have, and more than we are willing for them to retain.

I need not submit an argument at this time in favor of the initiative and referendum, but as I shall not be here again for some weeks I deem it worth while to answer some of the arguments that have been advanced against county option, since the opposition to county option is responsible for obstructing the initiative and referendum. It is hardly necessary to submit any argument in favor of county option for it stands upon its own merits, and those who oppose it can not successfully combat the arguments presented in its favor. The presumption is on the side of those who favor county option; the presumption is always upon the side of those who assert the right of the people to have what they want. In order to overthrow that presumption there must be sound argument. Take the situation in this state. We have town option, that is, a town has the right to exclude saloons if it desires to do so, and no opponent of county option dares to controvert that right. The state has the right to prohibit saloons. Nobody controverts that. Upon what ground, then, will one dispute the right of the county, half way between the town and the state, to vote upon the subject?

I have heard it said that it is unfair to allow a county to exclude the saloons unless a victory for the wets in a county removes all restrictions. "Why," they ask, as if it were a reasonable question, "should a victory for the wets close all saloons unless a victory for the wets opens all the saloons?" There are several answers, if the question were worthy of a serious reply. In the first place, we have in the state the very situation which opponents of county option say would be unfair in the county. This state went wet twenty years ago. If it had gone dry all the saloons would have been closed. What opponent of county option will insist that because the state went wet there should be no closing of saloons in smaller localities? The liquor interests would not be willing to submit state prohibition on any such conditions as that implied in the question. That is, they would not be willing to have the proposition submitted in this way; if state prohibition carries all the saloons shall be closed, if state prohibition is defeated then there shall be no local prohibition anywhere in the state. The liquor interests would not dare to go before the people on such a proposition, neither would they be willing to submit that proposition in a county. When county option is secured each county will have the right to vote on the subject of saloons, and there is probably not a county in the state in which the saloon interests would be willing to submit a proposition in line with the argument they now make. They would not be willing to ask that a victory against county option be construed as a permission to establish a saloon anywhere and everywhere regardless of local sentiment. When we have county option the liquor interests in each county will be very glad to have it understood that any town in the county can adopt a non-license policy in case the county itself does not adopt a no-saloon policy. The fallacy of the argument to which I have referred lies in the fact that the opponents of county option talk of what is fair to the saloon. The word "fairness" ought not to be used by an advocate of the saloon. The saloon is an evil, and where it is allowed to exist at all it is defended not as a good thing but as a nuisance that is necessary. To say that, because a majority of the people of the county are not willing to close all saloons therefore the people of no community should be allowed to close a saloon is an insult to their intelligence, and the argument will not be made when the subject is generally understood.

There is another argument which I have heard advanced. Men have told me that a majority of the people of their county favored saloons and that the saloons therefore ought not to be disturbed. My answer is that under county option the people of any county can have saloons if they want them. The man who opposes county option ought to be asked to answer a question: "Are you afraid that under county option the saloons of your county will be closed?" If he says he is, then in opposing county option he is opposed to the people of his county deciding the question for themselves. In other words, he wants saloons in the county whether the majority of the people want them or not. If he says that he is not afraid of his county going dry then he is not satisfied to have saloons in his county but wants to force saloons into counties that are opposed to them. A liquor dealer might defend such a position