The Direct Election of Senators

To oppose the popular election of senators is to question the wisdom of our form of government.

Each generation is capable of self-government, and must suit to its peculiar needs the machinery of government and the laws.

In the house of representatives, July 20, 1894, Mr. Bryan said:

Mr. Speaker: I desire to call the attention of the house to what I consider a very important question involved in this joint resolution. I shall not consume time in discussing the general principle of electing senators by the people. I believe we can take it for granted that not only in the country at large, but in this body, there is an overwhelming sentiment in favor of restoring to the people the right to elect their senators by a direct vote. It matters not by what course of reasoning we reach that conclusion. We may conclude that the constitution was a compromise in the beginning: that this plan was inserted as a necessity, and that the necessity having passed away, we can and ought to change it; or we may conclude that it was wise at that time, because then they had poor means of communication, and little means of knowing the character of the men for whom they voted, but that with our daily newspapers and our telegraph facilities we need not now delegate our powers. But whatever may have been the reason for adopting the present plan in the beginning, we realize today that no man can stand upon the floor of this house and defend the election of United States senators by state legislatures and at the same time defend the election of governors and state representatives by a vote of the people. No distinction can be made between this and other representative offices.

If the people of a state have enough intelligence to choose their representatives in the state legislature; if they have enough intelligence to choose their executive officers; if they have enough intelligence to choose their judges and their officials in all the departments of the state and county, they have enough intelligence to choose the men who shall represent them in the United States senate. To oppose the popular election of senators is to question the wisdom of our form of government.

We all recognize that there is a reason for the election of senators by a direct vote today that did not exist at the time the constitution was adopted. We know that today great corporations exist in our states, and that these great corporations, different from what they used to be one hundred years ago, are able to compass the election of their tools and their agents through the instrumentality of legislatures, as they could not if senators were elected directly by the people.

It is said that conventions will nominate. Yes, but behind conventions stand the voters, and the delegate to a convention dare not support a man whom the members of a legislature might vote for with impunity. The candidate nominated by the convention must appeal to the voters, but the candidate chosen by a legislative caucus appeals to no one, and is responsible to no one. Men have been elected to the senate whom no party convention would have dared to nominate.

We are told that we must not change the constitution because it is a sacred instrument. Who is the best friend, he who flatters and worships or he who reproves and corrects? He who would make such alterations as changed conditions necessitate is a better friend to the constitution and to good government than he who defends faults and is blind to defects. Besides, the federal constitution has already been amended fifteen times. Amendment was contemplated and provision made for it in the instrument itself.

Our state constitutions are frequently changed, and necessarily so, since circumstances change from year to year. Pennsylvania has had four constitutions, Missouri four, Texas three, Virginia five, etc. Each generation is capable of self-government, and must suit to its peculiar needs the machinery of government and the laws.

Mr. Speaker, I do not desire, however, to dwell upon this phase of the question, but I want to call attention to what I believe to be a very important paragraph in this bill. This bill makes the election by direct vote compulsory, and includes a protection against federal interference. We might as well recognize conditions. There is no statesmanship in shutting our eyes to the facts and asking for things which, though we desire them, yet we can not secure. If two-thirds of both house and three-fourths of the states were democratic, we might be able to secure a provision which would protect the election of United States senators and representatives against federal interference.

If two-thirds of both houses and three-fourths of the states were republican they might secure an amendment electing senators by a direct vote and putting the control of such elections under the supervision of the general government. But there is not today, there has not been for years, and probably will not be for years to come, a time when two-thirds of both houses, and three-fourths of the states will be controlled by one political party. Therefore, it is worse than useless to attempt to engraft upon this measure a political principle which can never be adopted until three-fourths of the states are in the control of one party.

Therefore the democrat who insists that we shall not have the election of senators by the people unless we provide against federal interference might just as well insist that we shall not have it for years to come. The republican who insists that we shall not have it until we authorize federal control might as well announce that he does not want to elect senators by the people. We, as democrats, should recognize that we must go before republicans and ask them to vote for this bill, and republicans should recognize that they can not secure the ratification of any amendment without the aid of democratic members and democratic states.

Mr. Northway. If you will strike out that provision you are talking about, I will vote for the bill.

Mr. Hudson. My friend states that the democrats are in favor of electing United States senators by direct vote of the people. I want to ask him if he does not know that the Omaha platform of the populists declared in favor of the election of United States senators by a direct vote of the people? And in order to call my friend's attention to the doctrine declared by that convention, I will read the eighth section of the platform:

"Resolved, That we favor a constitutional provision limiting the office of president and vice president to one term, and providing for the election of senators of the United States by a direct vote of the people."

Mr. Bryan. Mr. Speaker, I understand that that is in the populist platform, and I do not think it makes the proposition any worse because it was embodied in that platform. The platform adopted by my congressional convention also declared in favor of the election of senators by a direct vote. The proposition is good, it matters not who advocates it. It is good whether the democrats advocate it, or whether the republicans advocate it, or whether the populists advocate it. It is good because it is consistent with "a government of the people, by the people, and for the people;" and I welcome it whether it comes from the populist platform or from any other source, or whether it comes without the indorsement of any convention.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I propose a substitute for this resolution—but I shall not have it read until later—which will simply leave it optional with the state whether it will elect senators by a direct vote or not. The justification for this substitute is simple and plain. If we leave it optional with the states, we are not compelled either to prohibit federal interference or to provide for it. The optional plan gives to the republican party all the protection which it now has.

It gives to the democrats who want to prohibit federal interference all the protection which they now have. If we adopt this substitute we leave it to the states to say wheher they wish to elect senators by the people under the constitution as it is now. If the republicans say that will give the right of federal interference, let them believe so and vote for it, but it does not alter the constitution. If those who oppose federal interference fear the general government will attempt to control the election of senators, I say to them this bill provides that the state may go back and elect by the present plan, if it desires, and thus secure all the protection it has now. Therefore it gives to the man who opposes federal interference every safeguard that is now provided. It gives to the man who favors federal control every safeguard that he has today. My substitute neither adds to nor takes from the constitution, so far as federal control is concerned.

I beg you not to yield to party prejudice. I appeal to you who favor popular elections, is it not wiser to take this course than to attempt to fasten this proposition to some political question upon which the parties differ? We know that in the Fifty-first congress the republicans passed a bill through the house which was more stringent than the law we recently repealed in regard to federal elections. We know that in this congress the democratic party repealed certain federal election laws, and on the passage the democrats voted for and that every republican voted against that bill.

Need we any more evidence to prove that the republican party stands by its advocacy of federal control? Need we any more evidence to prove that the democratic party opposes federal interference? We realize that the two parties stand face to face on this proposition, and are irreconcilably divided; and it is not wisdom to choose a plan of electing which passes between the lines and does not antagonize either side?

Why not, then, Mr. Speaker, accept a proposition which leaves this political question out, and which will bring the people face to face with the simple proposition: "Do you wish to elect senators by a direct vote of the people or not?"

Ah, sirs, we go forth to battle with all the allied power of wealth against us, and if we give to them a single excuse behind which they can entrench themselves we shall toil in vain for this reform. If we go forth from this hall with a partisan principle or party tenet tied to the proposition to elect senators by a popular vote, every railroad corporation, every gigantic aggregation of wealth will be appealing to party prejudice, and they will not appeal in vain.

If we attempt to prohibit federal interference, they will go to the republicans and say: "Are you going to give up the right of the federal government to control elections?" If federal interference is authorized, they will go to the democrats and say: "Are you going to surrender the right of self-government?"

But, sirs, if we eliminate partisanship, if we eliminate the question of federal control, and bring it down to the naked question: "Are you in favor of election of senators by the people?" we can defeat any combinations formed against us.

The gentleman from Missouri (Mr. De Armond) said yesterday that men would not vote for the optional plan if opposed to popular elections because they knew that it might soon be a burning question in the states. I believe, Mr. Speaker, under the optional plan it would at once become a burning question in the states. Give to the people of the states the right to express thmselves, and you can depend upon it they will secure this reform.

But, sirs, we have not now that right and will not soon have it if the proposition is to be weighted down by a great political controversy. I have such confidence in the merits of this proposition that if you leave it to the people of the states to decide I believe they will decide it right. I have such faith in the merit of the proposition that I am even willing to leave them the power to go back, if they want to do so, because I do not believe that this revolution will turn backward.

And now, sirs, if we want to secure the election of senators by the people we must submit a proposition free from the republican idea of federal interference, and free from the democratic idea of non-interference. We may just as well cease the attempt to secure this reform if we are going to tie to it federal election laws. I appeal to members on both sides of this house, members who in their hearts desire this reform, members who in their own judgment believe that the time has come to give the people a chance to vote for United States senators, democrats, republicans and populists alike, to join in a proposition which will eliminate the political question and leave us simply the question of election by the people or not.

I shall vote for the election of senators by the people in whatever form it is presented. If I must choose between the compulsory election of senators with federal interference prohibited, and compulsory election with federal interference authorized, I shall vote to prohibit federal interference. But if it is necessary to have federal interference permitted, as in the case of