

MASTERFUL SPEECH OF HON. GEORGE W. BERGE

MR. BERGE'S SPEECH

Mr. Toastmaster and Gentlemen:

There is in progress now among the people a revolution the like of which this country has never seen. For years the people have been importing, petitioning, yes, begging, their chosen representatives to save this government for them and their children from the greedy grasp of selfishness, corruption and corporate domination, but having petitioned and begged in vain, the people are now leading an open revolt against this usurpation of political power by these influences and are determined at any cost to reclaim the government again and themselves administer it for their good.

People Do Not Rule

Our government in name is a government of the people, but in fact the people are shut out from its control; if some other influence has usurped this control and is running the government for its own private and selfish ends and forcing down upon the people something that is to their injury, then this government is not administered by the people nor for the people.

Never since the formation of the government have the people groped about in the murky atmosphere of pillage and plunder, of bribery and corruption and corporate domination as now. Representative government has been robbed of its true meaning. The people's voice has been silenced by the power of money. Their influence in public affairs has been paralyzed by corporate tyranny. In other words, the corporations, the trusts, the millionaires and multi-millionaires are running the government for the purpose of plundering the country and the people are lying helpless and prostrate at their feet.

Bryan a True Prophet

For more than ten years the voice of Bryan, like one crying in the wilderness, has been telling the people of the judgment to come, but he was ridiculed, maligned and called a demagogue. But now the truth of all that he has ever told us and more has burst upon us like a cyclone with all its rage. The country stands shocked and overwhelmed before the disclosures of the past year. Whenever and wherever there has been a chance to rob the people and sell them out to corporate wealth, there the commercial and political highwaymen have done their work.

In New York they have robbed widows and orphans of millions of trust funds; in Philadelphia, St. Louis, Milwaukee and many other cities they have robbed the people of valuable franchises and bribed and corrupted the public officials; the corporations and the trusts have openly carried on their work of exploitation and ruin without any real interference from the government; the railroads have made and unmade men, business enterprise and cities; they have completely bribed and overpowered our public officials so that these officials instead of representing the people have become the agents and tools of the corporations. Go into any city, county, or state, where there is corruption and a betrayal of the people and you will find that the officeholders are pass-bribed politicians.

Delinquent Representatives

The average congressman today contents himself with leave to print a speech now and then; he gets jobs for his political henchmen at home; he sends out a few garden seeds and now and then he gets a raise in salary for a clerk or a higher rent for some old building owned by one of his constituents and rented to the government for a postoffice. With the larger questions which have to do with the welfare of

Delivered at the Democratic Dollar Dinner at Lincoln, Nebraska, March 6, 1906 "The Issue in Nebraska"

Representative government has been robbed of its true meaning. The people's voice has been silenced by the power of money. Their influence in public affairs has been paralyzed by corporate tyranny.

The corporations, the trusts, the millionaires and multi-millionaires are running the government for the purpose of plundering the country, and the people are lying helpless and prostrate at their feet.

Whenever and wherever there has been a chance to rob the people and sell them out to corporate wealth, there the commercial and political highwaymen have done their work.

The corporations have bribed and overpowered our public officials so that these officials, instead of representing the people, have become the agents and servants of the railroads. Go into any city, county, or state where there is corruption and a betrayal of the people and you will find that the officeholders are pass-bribed politicians.

In this state no man, except by accident, can be elected to the United States senate, to congress, to a state office, to the legislature, or even to a county and city office unless he bows his head to railway dictation.

The office-holders and politicians and the railroads constitute a machine that absolutely dominates the political and commercial life of Nebraska.

This machine is held together and constantly made stronger by the free pass bribery system and federal, state and county patronage which the railroads always control. The railroads not only distribute the passes, but they also distribute the offices.

This relationship between the railroads and the politicians is a relationship of bribery and conspiracy to betray the people whenever railroad interests are involved.

In 1890, when I came to this state, the first voice I heard from Nebraska people was an appeal for a reduction of freight and passenger rates and control of the railroads generally, but today, apparently, we are no nearer the goal than when we started sixteen years ago. The chosen representatives of the people, instead of representing the people have represented the railroads and obstructed every piece of legislation the people wanted. God forgive us that we let go unwhipped such recreant public officials.

The real issue in Nebraska is to get men who will be true to the people. The people want no more sham battles with half-hearted generals; they want no more lip service; they want real men who can be trusted and who will lead them out of the mire and quicksands of corporate domination and corporate debauchery, out to the hills of common decency and self-government.

In Nebraska this republican machine has always been the defender and protector of the railroads and an apologist for public thievery and corruption.

Two years ago I made my campaign for governor upon these identical issues. I demanded that the free pass bribery system and the professional lobby be destroyed. I demanded a reduction of freight and passenger rates. I insisted that the railroads pay their just share of taxes. I said that the real issue was the overthrow of railway domination in the state and the restoration of the state government into the hands of the people. The people gave me 30,000 more votes than Parker and Watson combined. That vote spoke in no uncertain language.

Yet when the legislature convened Governor Mickey in his message to the legislature was as silent as the grave touching every question relating to the railroads. Neither the governor nor the legislature did what the people wanted. They did the bidding of the railroads. That was the time to talk; that was the time to act. They did nothing and have forfeited the confidence of the people.

If this year we will unfurl the people's banner and champion their cause in dead earnest, then on next November's election day the prairies of Nebraska will be strewn with the wrecks of corrupt bosses and broken political railway machines and the people will have won a glorious victory.

the people he gives himself no concern. He leaves them to the bosses and the corporations. Some of the senators are even worse than the congressmen. When they go to Washington they are wined and dined by the aristocracy of that capital city and become at once the center of every social function. They do not even pay proper respect to their political henchmen at home. They draw their salaries as senators; they become the attorneys of large corporations and represent them not only in the courts, but also before the departments of the government.

Liberties Are in Danger

As attorneys for these corporations they introduce and have congress pass laws giving special privileges to their clients. But their work of treachery and betrayal does not end even there. When the wrath of the people can be suppressed no longer and when with the whip of righteous indignation, under the leadership of a courageous president, they drive the congressmen to the passage of some needed legislation, then these senators step in between the people and the corporations and openly defy the people and actively plead the cause of the corporations. My friends, Benedict Arnold was no more a traitor to his country than these sen-

ators who so brazenly betray the people. Is this popular government? Are these the representatives of the people? Is this the government where we are told the humble citizen, the small man in business, gets the same protection as the rich and powerful? Tell me, are the people or the corporations in control of the government? I sound the note of warning that unless the people make sure in the present revolt to reclaim their government the time may come when they will not be able to do it.

Conditions in Nebraska

In Nebraska conditions are even worse. Here the people are absolutely shut out from the control of their government. The railroads are absolutely supreme. In this state no man, except by accident, can be nominated and elected to the United States senate, to congress, to a state office, to the legislature or even to a county and city office, until he bows his head to railway dictation. The politicians therefore, and the railroads constitute a machine that absolutely dominates the political and commercial life of Nebraska. This machine is held together and constantly made stronger by the free pass bribery system and federal, state, and county patronage which the railroads always control. The railroads not only distribute the

passes but they also distribute the offices from the highest to the lowest and frequently make new ones for their political henchmen and friends. This relationship between the railroads and the politicians, from the highest to the lowest in the state, is a relationship of bribery and conspiracy to betray the people whenever railroad interests are involved. These conditions in Nebraska are a national disgrace and every self-respecting citizen should hang his head in shame on account of them.

Work of Railway Machine

But let us look at this machine in operation. Not for twenty-five years has a law been passed by our legislature, except a few by a fusion legislature, that was really designed for the good of the people. The fusion administration early in its reign, passed the Australian ballot law and the maximum freight law, both good laws and both far-reaching in their wholesome effect, but the Australian ballot law has been weakened and emasculated by the politicians and the maximum freight law was at first enjoined in the courts and those charged with its enforcement now refuse to enforce it. But outside of these laws not a single law has been passed for the people.

In 1890, when I came to this state, the first voice I heard from Nebraska people was an appeal for a reduction of freight and passenger rates and control of the railroads in this state. This agitation has continued all these years and today, apparently, we are no nearer the goal than when we started sixteen years ago. The chosen representatives of the people, instead of representing the people, have represented the railroads and obstructed every piece of legislation the people wanted. God forgive us that we let go unwhipped such recreant public officials.

A Recreant Legislature

Take the last legislature—what did it do? With few exceptions the members came to Lincoln with railroad passes in their pockets. When they got here, about the first thing they did was to make a raid on the treasury of the state and rob it of twenty cents for every mile they traveled for which they never paid. With uplifted hands they swore they were taking the money as travel money, when it was nothing less than a graft. Could the people expect anything from such a body? Scores of good bills were introduced, some of them by honest members and some of them by railroad tools to fool their constituency at home. But whatever the merit of the bills and by whomsoever introduced, everyone of them met ignominious defeat. During that whole session railroad lobbyists led the members around by the noses just like that many blind pigs.

A Monumental Farce

I had a little experience myself with that legislature. I drew and had introduced an anti-pass bill. Later I appeared before the committee on railroads to argue for its passage. In the room where we met the legislative committee was seated before me. Behind the committee spectators gathered in large numbers. In front to my right and half way facing the audience sat the lobbyists representing the different railroads. I appealed to the committee as best I could for the passage of this law. When I had finished, certain members of the committee joined the lobbyists in heaping ridicule upon me for advocating the passage of such a law. The whole proceeding was a monumental farce. It was a startling revelation to me. I might just as well have argued the question direct to the lobbyists. That committee sat there looking at me with glass eyes and with their hearts steeled against the bill and what I said. The complete mastery over the