



# By THEODORE ROOSEVELT

## A Remedy for Some Forms of Selfish Legislation

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THE August number of the World's Work contains an article which is of interest to all who are concerned in the vital subject to which we give the somewhat foggy title of "Political Reform." The article, for obvious reasons anonymous, is written by a member of congress who, the editors of the World's Work say, has served for more than ten years in the house of representatives, has acted on many important committees, and has been successful in "getting things" for his constituency. The article is described as "showing the reason why the 'pork-barrel', special tariff favors, and private pension bills become law," the reason being, to quote the words of the author, that "the dictum of the constituency to the congressman is 'Get all you can for US.' There are no restrictions placed upon his method of getting it.

Until the American people themselves become more national and less local, until constituencies cease to regard their congressmen as solicitors at the national treasury, congress will continue to enact iniquitous groups of local favors into national legislation."

This serious charge against the American people—for which there is unquestionably altogether too much justification—the author proceeds to substantiate by relating some of his own experiences with constituents which, however surprising they may seem to the general reader, will seem almost common place to all who know how the average constituency does in actual practice treat its congressman.

The writer sets forth the fact that, in the first place, ninety per cent. of the letters which a congressman receives are requests for special favors to be obtained in some way or other, directly or indirectly, from the United States treasury. For instance, while the Payne-Aldrich tariff law was under discussion, this particular congressman received in May, 1909, the following letter from the secretary of a powerful commercial association in his district:

"I have been instructed by the board of directors of this association to advise you that at special meeting May 20, a resolution, copy of which is inclosed, was unanimously adopted, urging our representatives in congress to use every endeavor to have the present tariff in (mentioning three of the products of the industries referred to) increased one cent per pound and the present tariff on (mentioning the other two products) increased half a cent per pound. I wish to further advise you that we have heard from Senator \_\_\_\_\_ and he informs us that he will take care of this matter in the senate."

When the bill was finally passed, the congressman succeeded in adding half a cent a pound to the duty on two of these products and in preventing any reduction on the others. A year later, when the popular clamor against the bill had become acute, the same association that had asked him to vote for increases wrote to the congressman denouncing the bill as "the most iniquitous measure ever enacted by congress" and requesting him to explain by letter why he had voted with "the Reactionaries" to pass the bill. When it was pointed out to the association that it had urged the congressman to obtain an increase of duty on the products in which it was interested, it dropped its demand for an explanation. An influential newspaper published in his district editorially commended him while the bill was under debate for his "intelligent efforts" to increase the duty on manufactured articles in which the district was interested, and a year later the same newspaper in the same editorial column denounced him as one of "the legislative banditti responsible for the Payne-Aldrich measure."

River and harbor legislation is another field in which local selfishness busies itself, to the exclusion of national needs. In this case requests are not made by letter but by delegations which come to Washington beseeching their senators and representatives. "There is," says the frank writer of this article, "figuratively speaking, between \$50,000,000 and \$80,000,000 on the table to be divided. The committee divides it so that every one is satisfied, at least to a reasonable extent." Every one, that is, but the people at large, the people who have no special interest to serve, and who feel keenly indignant that the rivers and harbors of the United States are developed in a fashion so inferior to that of Europe.

Nor are all the requests for legislation merely. One constituent desired to have this particular congressman put his name on the free mailing list for all public documents. That this would be impossible, because it would mean delivering to the applicant several tons of documents every month, does not in the slightest detract from the interest of the fact elicited by an investigation that the applicant was a manufacturer of an article made from waste paper, and the public docu-

ments would afford a very useful source of raw material.

Is there a remedy for such a state of things? The answer is, yes; and, moreover, it is a remedy which congress can itself immediately provide.

There is no complete remedy, of course. No scheme can be devised which can prevent such a request as that of the constituent last named who his public documents to use in his private paper business. Requests like this merely mean that in every district individuals will always be found who will request improper favors. As regards these people, all that can be done is to create a vigorous public opinion—an opinion which shall not only make it uncomfortable for any man to demand such favors, but which shall cordially support the congressman in refusing them and hold him accountable for granting them.

Congress has now, and has long had, the power to rid its members of almost all the improper pressure brought to bear upon the individual by special interests—great and small, local and metropolitan—on such subjects as tariff legislation, river and harbor legislation, and pension legislation. Congress has not exercised this power; chiefly because of what I am bound to regard as a very shortsighted and unwise belief that it is beneath its dignity to delegate any of its functions. By passing a rule which would forbid the reception or passage of any pension bill save the pension legislation recommended by the commissioner of pensions (this of course to be rejected or amended as congress saw fit, but not so amended as to include any special or private legislation), congress would at once do away with the possibility of its members being subject to local pressure for improper private pension bills, and at the same time guarantee proper treatment for the veteran who really does deserve to have everything done for him that the country can afford.

In the case of the tariff and the river and harbor legislation, what is needed in each case is ample provision for a commission of the highest possible grade, composed of men who thoroughly know the subject, and who possess every attribute required for the performance of the great and difficult task of framing in outline the legislation that the country, as distinguished from special interests, really needs. These men, from the very nature of the case, will be wholly free from the local pressure of special interests so keenly felt by every man who is dependent upon the vote of a particular district every two years for his continuance in public life. Such a river and harbor commission could report, and probably would report, a great and comprehensive national scheme for river and harbor improvements fit to be considered by the people as a whole upon its merits, and not dependent for enactment into law upon a system of log-rolling designed to placate special interests which are powerful in each of many score congressional districts. Such a tariff commission could get at the facts of labor cost here and abroad by expert inquiry, and not by the acceptance of interested testimony; such a commission could consider dispassionately the probable effect upon the entire social and economic body of all changes in any given branch of the tariff, and its recommendations would represent the exercise of careful judgment from a disinterested standpoint. Such a commission could work in harmony with the commissioner of labor so as to insure that the laborer for whom the tariff is passed get the full benefit of it; for the major part of the benefit of a protective tariff should unquestionably go to the wage-workers.

Even under such conditions of tariff-making errors might be committed, but they would be merely those errors of disinterested judgment incidental to every kind of public or, for the matter of that, private effort, and the work would not be hampered from the beginning by the need of gratifying private selfishness.

It is only in this way that tariff legislation, river and harbor legislation, and pension legislation can be treated from the standpoint of principle and not from the very low standpoint of privilege and preference. The obstacle hitherto to the adoption of such a method of treatment has come from the queer dislike felt by so many congressional leaders to a course of action which they (quite unjustifiably) feel would in some way be a limitation of their powers. I think this feeling is passing. It is simply another instance of the kind of feeling which makes some executives suspicious about delegating their work to any subordinate, and which makes many voters, who have not pondered the matter deeply, desire to elect great numbers of people on a ticket of such length that it is out of the question for any except professional politician to know much about them.

THEODORE ROOSEVELT.

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