

Democracy's Ideal: "Let's Get Ours"

By Harry Gunnison Brown

"Two hundred dollars a month," "thirty dollars every Thursday," "protection" for American industry and labor, "parity prices" for the farmer, etc., etc. What does it all really mean except that each group is trying disingenuously to get something away from others and that the siren call of something for nothing is, to millions of people, just about irresistible.

The highway robber demands something for nothing at the point of a pistol. The burglar seeks something for nothing by sneaking into your house at dead of night. The pickpocket reaches slyly into your pocket or your purse. The bribe giver pays alderman or legislator or other public official to betray you and other citizens into the hands of men who will thereby profit at your expense,—again something for nothing. All these are looked on askance as criminals and grafters. What they do is not "respectable." They are looked on as "lower" than the common run of folks. They are considered as public enemies and reprobated as such. They are "dangerous" to society.

But how do the seekers for government favors and privileges differ from them? The seekers for government funds combine and conspire together to OUT-VOTE those who do not want to be mulcted of their hard-earned incomes. They do their best to fool the rest of us—just as the burglar, the short-weight merchant and the pickpocket try to fool us—and they try to persuade us by various hocus-pocus logical tricks and by attractive slogans, that we shall be richer to have them take a part of our earnings away from us than not to have them take it away from us. Fundamentally they are trying to steal just as truly as the burglar and the pickpocket are trying to steal.

However, we are, often, more helpless against their assaults than against the assaults of the burglar and the pickpocket. With care, we may guard our money against the

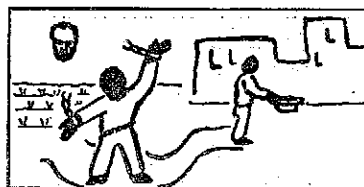
tricks of the pickpocket. With the help of a watchdog—and perhaps a pistol—we may checkmate the burglar. But how shall we protect ourselves against a CONSPIRING GROUP of robbers who VOTE their robbery into government policy so that stealing becomes legal and the refusal to consent to being robbed becomes the crime? Surely, in this regard, the conspiring group of robbers are a worse menace than the criminals who prey upon us each by himself.

Of course a conspiring group of robbers has its apologetics,—its philosophy of justification. The robbers—if they have been brought up with some slight sense of right and wrong, i.e., if they have some little glimmers of conscience—can live with themselves more comfortably by fooling themselves into the notion that it is "right" for them to get something for nothing. They can dream happily of the gains that their proposed policy is to secure for them, and not have these golden dreams spoiled by a scorching contempt for themselves, if they can manage to make themselves believe, either that they "need the money" more than those from whom it is taken and that this justifies the taking, or that—as their spokesmen try so hard to tell their victims or prospective victims—those from whom it is taken are thereby made richer than if it were not taken. Similarly, the burglar and highway robber, no doubt, sometimes persuade themselves that their greater "need" justifies their taking money from people a shade richer than they; though I can't recall ever having heard of a burglar or highway robber who seriously argued that the people from whom he took money were so made more prosperous than if he had not taken it! The conspiring

groups of robbers who take from the people by turning their very government into an instrument of thievery are thus, in a second way, worse than individual thieves and robbers. For they add to the material injury they inflict, the insult of a pretense that the injury is really a benefit!

There is still a third difference between those who do their robbing as individuals—as burglars and pickpockets—and those who do it collectively and through deceiving some of their victims and outvoting the rest. The thief who is a thief in his individual capacity usually practices his robbery on the comparatively well-to-do. We need not attribute this to him as any special virtue, for doubtless he has commonly no motive other than to make his takings large,—as they cannot be if he preys mainly on the very poor. But—virtue or not—this is a limitation that our robbers by group conspiracy do not place on themselves. Those who rob us through a protective tariff always were and still are willing to have this tariff levied on goods that the poorest of our people use, including necessities of life. The Townsend plan to give \$200 a month to every person over sixty, and, therefore, \$400 a month to every married couple over sixty (and even \$200 is a far larger amount than the average person who has to work for his living is able to earn), definitely proposes to raise the necessary money by a sales tax. And a sales tax is certainly a burden on the very poor, who would thus contribute of their poverty to the comparative affluence of many "oldsters" still full of vitality and well able to work.

Similarly, the Agricultural Adjustment Act is most certainly calculated to make life harder for countless families of city workers, to whom it is intended to mean increased cost of food and clothing, as well as to agricultural laborers and tenants, to whom it means diminished opportunity to work because part of the land on which they might work is withdrawn from use. Indeed,



the original A. A. A. relied on the so-called processing taxes as the means of financing the venture. And, though these taxes were thrown out by the Supreme Court, there have been recent suggestions that, counting on the changed and now more "liberal" personnel of the Court, the Administration and Congress might restore them. If it be claimed that the depression distress of many farmers justified some form of special taxation to relieve this distress during the worst emergency, will it be likewise claimed, not only that the policy should be a permanent one, but also that the cost of it may properly be imposed, in large degree, on the earned incomes from the labor of the poor?

What beneficiary of or apologist for any of these plans has any interest in trying to finance his pet scheme so as to MINIMIZE its burden on the community, or any interest in promoting the GENERAL welfare, or any aim other than the sordid one of "getting his" or, if a politician, any thought in supporting one or more of these schemes, other than to get the votes of the expectant beneficiaries by appealing

to their basest characteristics of self aggrandizement?

It might be supposed by a youthful idealist that a few among the supporters of benefits to farmers, or of subsidies to manufacturing, or of a \$200 a month pension to every person over sixty, would look to the COMMUNITY-produced location value of land as a desirable source for such benefits or subsidies, rather than to taxes on the hard-earned incomes of the poor. It might be thought that even among these advocates of something for nothing devices, there would occasionally be one who would have a kind word for the idea of drawing on such a type of income as land rent, which is not really earned by its recipients, to finance his pet venture, instead of penalizing earned incomes, including even the smallest ones. But if there is anywhere such an one, WHERE is he, and WHO is he? All the ballyhoo seems to be directed, sordidly, to the "main chance," for each person concerned, of "getting his."

Surely, when all the time-consecrated and all the newly proposed systems of robbing the masses are

evaluated and compared, none will be found more serious than the private appropriation of the rent of land. That a majority should have to pay a minority, in this twentieth century, for the very PERMISSION to work on and to live on the earth and to make use of COMMUNITY-produced location advantages, is indeed a sad reflection on the way a so-called democracy betrays the masses of its people. But is there any use in looking for help in fighting this evil, to groups of the robbed who are happily enthused and excited by the prospect of themselves using the power of government to rob others who are worse off than they?

Can we hope to establish, in some calculable future, a society without special privilege,—a society where incomes received have some reasonable relation to services rendered? Or must our people be degraded, in their relations with each other, to

"The good old rule,

The simple plan,

That they should take who have the power

And they should keep who can"?