

On Underwriting an Evil

I SEE by the papers that a convention of school teachers put Candidate Dewey on the spot. The pedagogical proletarians demanded that he declare himself on the matter of Federal subsidization of their trade. The implication is quite clear: their votes are up for purchase.

If I were a teacher I could be influenced by the logic of this bargain. I should surely vote for the candidate who promised to better my economic position—provided I believed him. The fact that I would be contributing more to the tax-fund from which my emoluments are derived would not deter me, since more would be taken (for my benefit) from others than from me. Of course, before committing my vote I would consider Candidate Truman's bid. That is good business.

But, I am not a school teacher. Rather than profiting from the subsidy, I am one of the many who will be forced to pay it. Besides, I entertain grave doubts as to the value of socialized education; that thing has been in great vogue in this country for over a century, to such an extent that nearly every child has been exposed to it for the most formative decade of its

life, at least, and the results do not strike me as worth the expense. It may be that education cannot do anything about raising the mental level of the mass-mind; if so, why continue the expenditure on the experiment?

Anyhow, I object to being taxed for something I do not wish to buy. I see no sense in filling the world with literate morons. Parents have a right, if not a duty, to train their youngsters along lines that seem good to them, but with that

right comes the obligation to pay for the training out of their own pockets; they ought not to force that obligation on others. That is an imposition, and I resent it, and since both candidates will outbid one another in promoting this imposition (what have they to lose?), I will not vote for either.

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IF I were a labor union leader (not a dues paying member), I would surely vote for Candidate Truman. It was his party that gave me the Wagner law, by which I profited; it made possible the check-off system, relieving me of the necessity of collecting dues from an incalcitrant membership; it gave me a monopoly of jobs by legalizing the closed shop; it gave me the machinery by which I can better impose my will on the workers. Dewey's party then put over the Taft-Hartley law, which aims to rob me of some of my prerogatives and to make me accountable to somebody other than myself. What else could I do but vote for Truman if I were a union leader?

But, I am not a union leader. I am one of the many whom this job-monopolist discomferts. The strikes he engineers cause me much inconvenience. If he succeeds in securing a raise in pay for his following he does so at my expense, and I notice that the workers are none the

better off for the pay boost; nobody profits by the union leader's success. Besides, the law which more firmly saddled him

on the nation's economy brought into existence an extensive and expensive bureaucracy, which is a further threat to my liberties and a drain on my pocket-book. My self-interest is against voting for Candidate Truman.

I would like to vote for somebody who promised—even though I doubted his word—to rescind the Wagner law and to abolish the enforcement agency. However, Candidate Dewey is making no such promise, and I suspect that during his four years in office, if he is elected, he will be busy wooing votes for his second term; he will not jeopardize his chances by alienating the labor leaders. I cannot vote for Dewey.

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THE Negroes and the Jews and the Catholics who are convinced that jobs now closed to them by prejudice would be made available by legislation have reason to vote for the candidate promising them FEPC. I see in this proposal nothing but another ineffective, meddling and costly bureau and therefore cannot endorse this candidate. But, the other candidate, whatever his private opinion may be, if he has any, is too sagacious to oppose what a large number of voters want. I cannot vote for him either.

If I were a manufacturer of something which foreign manufacturers could make better or at less cost, I would favor the candidate who promises greater restrictions on imports. But, my interests as a consumer incline me toward lower prices, and therefore toward free trade, and since neither of the candidates can afford to oppose the powerful protectionist interests I have nobody to vote for on that score.

I am not one of those who will profit by the subsidizing scheme known as ECA. I am neither an exporter nor a banker. I am just one of the many who must foot the bill and must suffer from the war which, I am convinced, will follow in the wake of ECA. Neither candidate pledges himself to quit this business, and so in self-respect I must pass up both of them.

Of course, if I were one of the millions drawing a livelihood from the tax-fund, or if any of my family were, or if I knew

somebody who knew somebody who could get me a lucrative position in the bureaucracy or a profitable contract from either party, my suffrage right might be activated. I would then have as much interest in the elections as have the candidates and their cohorts. Since, however, I must earn my living in ways that are unconnected with political largesse I see no reason to vote. Whichever candidate

is successful, my knowledge of political institutions tells me, there will be no reduction in my tax-burden, no less interference with my freedom. Things being as they are, I cannot do anything about that. I can only flatter my conscience by giving neither of them whatever comfort they might derive from my vote.

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THIS evaluation of the ballet is the only one maturity permits. The notion that politics is concerned with principles is sheer romance; no professional politician entertains it, and the whole history of politics denies it. With principles—that is, moral or philosophical concepts—politics simply has nothing to do, except as conveniences in promoting its business, which is the acquisition of power. The realistic art of politics consists in the balancing of various group interests, one against the other, so as to either attain or retain rulership over all. It is a juggling act.

This is no reflection on the intellectual integrity of the politician. His business does not call for any such quality and his supporters would be outraged if he presumed to bring it into bearing. Assuming that either of the current candidates were a convinced free trader, or believed that farm parity prices are economically unsound, or that veterans do not benefit from handouts, or—to go to an extreme—that the nation's bonded indebtedness is a burden on the economy and should be

wiped out, it would be political suicide for him to voice any such opinion. In the north a candidate who espoused "white supremacy" could have as little chance as a southern politician who did not. Were a considerable segment of the population, sufficiently large and powerful to offset the opposition, in favor of putting disabilities on Catholics or Jews or Masons, you would find candidates advocating legislation to that effect, even though their private judgment were against it. The politician's opinion is the opinion of his following, and their opinion is shaped by what they believe to be in their own interest.

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IT was always thus. Even when kings ruled by "divine right" the throne was held in place by the proper juxtaposition of rival and envious nobles. When the ambition of a particular noble got out of hand and an army was needed to make him respect divinity, the money-brokers supplied the funds and received their consideration, usually a grant of land and the "right" to collect rent from the users. In the eighteenth century the rising class of manufacturers and merchants came to the support of their king in his quarrels with the nobles, in exchange for tariffs, cartel privileges and the "rights" to foreign exploitation.

Constitutionalism and the extension of the suffrage did not alter the character of politics. These institutions merely increased the number of claimants for special privilege and complicated the art of balancing interests. In the early years of our country the politician's problem was quite simple; the pressure groups consisted of tariff-seekers, land-grabbers, money-brokers, franchise-hunters and a few others, and the balancing of interests was fixed by the size of campaign contributions. In due time, thanks to professional organizers, others got into the

game, and the politician now has to consider the privilege claims of vote-laden and skillfully led proletarians, farmers, doctors, educators, veterans—innumerable articulate groups—as well as the traditional claimants. The juggling has become more intricate.

That this result was inevitable becomes evident when we consider the nature of the ballot. It is nothing but a fragment of sovereignty. It represents a small piece of the power which, in an absolutism, is vested entirely in a single person or an oligarchy. And, just as the substance of political power consists of castles and food and pleasures for the autocrat, so to the holder of this fragment of diffused sovereignty it spells "better times." In short, the right of suffrage was demanded because of the expectation of a diffusion of economic goods, and that expectation is still the motive behind the "x" set down along the candidate's name.

The individual voter learned in time that the miniscule piece of sovereignty he held did him no good, that to bring about the expected result it must be augmented by others, so that the total would carry a potent bargaining power. Thus came the modern pressure group. It is the business of the leaders of these groups to convince the aspirant for office that their following cannot be ignored with impunity. It is the business of the aspirant to weigh the relative voting strength of the various groups, and, finding it impossible to hold on to all, to buy the strongest with promises. It is a deal. Any moral evaluation of the deal is silly, unless we condemn politics as a whole, for there is no way for the politician to attain or retain power unless he enters into such deals; in a democracy sovereignty lies in the hands of the voters, and it is they who propose the trading.

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THE vast majority of the voters are necessarily outside this market; there are too many of them. Politics is incapable of improving the general welfare simply because it is incompetent in the field of production; that is an economic process clearly distinct from the art of ruling. Hence, what the politician pledges to his supporting groups are advantages which must be made good by producers. Somebody must foot the bill, and that somebody is of necessity the vast heterogeneous body of producers or, rather, taxpayers. The common interest of these unorganized voters is "peace and prosperity," and the skill of the candidate consists in convincing them that in his bag of tricks is the correct formula for this concoction. He resorts to the legerdemain of language. What else has he?

I am one of these many unconnected with pressure-groups, am in no way in a position to profit from political advantage, and am convinced that the politician is primarily concerned with his own comfort and emoluments, not mine. What reason have I to vote for him? I would like to vote for a candidate who pledged himself to abolish taxation, *in toto*, for my reason and observation tell me that underlying all the ills of society is this predatory institution. I would surely profit if I were not taxed, and so would all producers. But, since the abolition of taxes would put the politician out of a job and would make impossible his dispensation of special privileges, it is not

likely that I shall have the opportunity of casting my vote for such a candidate. Lacking that opportunity, I see no sense in registering my faith in "the lesser of two evils."

If the citizenry as a whole were of like mind and stayed away from the polls, it is said, the "worst element" would get control of the political machinery. That

is true; but underlying that argument is the assumption that the "worst element" is not in control now. The evidence is all against that assumption. Even if the aspirant for office is equipped with the highest of motives he must drop that equipment when he achieves his goal, for then he is confronted with the problem of balancing interests, of compromising principle in the face of realities. In practice, as all the evidence indicates, that means the granting of advantages and the consequent creation of disadvantages, the transference of property from one group to another. The high-minded aspirant is thus forced by the nature of his business into the ranks of the "worst element." To vote such a man into office is in effect to contribute to his delinquency.

It is a truism of history that wherever property is accumulated there will always be some whose avarice prompts them to lay hands on it, violently if necessary, preferably through the regular and easy process of custom and law. That is, there will always be politicians and there will always be a supporting cast of self-seekers. I can do nothing about that. I can, however, retain and indulge the moral values which seem good to me and from the observance of which I enjoy the gratifying feeling of self-respect. That, like all matters of morality, is a purely personal conceit; others may do as they please, but I will not vote. I will not underwrite what I know to be an evil.