

The Power of Legislation

FEW people understand the tremendous power possessed by legislation. The voters who elect legislators are unaware of it. Even those citizens who have had the advantage of the higher education do not realize it. And as to the legislators themselves, rarely is one to be found who comprehends the mighty power resting in his hands.

Serving now my nineteenth term in a State legislature, I am prepared to say that many of our commonwealths could do more for the welfare of the people at one short session than has been done by all agencies during the past century.

This seemingly proposterous assertion is based upon the fact that legislative bodies give their attention to the mitigation of the bad effects which appear, rather than to the removal of the cause which produces the multitude of evils.

The burden of our laws is: You shan't do this and you shan't do that. If a law were enacted establishing fundamental justice, then violations of law would be reduced to a minimum, and the major part of our restrictive laws could be wiped from the statute book.

As an illustration of what I mean, take the case of chattel slavery. Born and bred in the South in the days of slavery, I recall the efforts which were made to mitigate its evils. Clergymen appealed both to the masters and to the slaves. They exhorted the former not to be cruel, but to be kind, to care for the aged and the sick among their servants, and in all things to obey the moral law. To the slaves themselves the preachers appealed to be honest, faithful, industrious and conform to the moral law.

What was the effect of a century of such teaching? In 1860 slavery was as bad as ever, a curse to both master and man, "the sum of all villainies." The law forbade the whites to teach any slave to read or write. The slaves could own no property, not even their own bodies, nor could they control their family relations.

But what happened? A few words were added to the Federal Constitution and slavery ceased to exist. The black man could become educated, he could own property, he could keep his family together. All because the law went to the root of the wrong and removed the cause; it abolished what it had created and perpetuated.

What is the cause of the strained relations between employers and workers? The former are determined not to become bankrupt, and the latter insist upon a wage which will supply continuously the comforts of life. Both demands are reasonable, but they cannot be met until the cause of bad conditions is removed.

The cause of the battle between the owner of an industrial plant and those who are employed by him is, that what they produce is not equitably distributed. Some interest goes to the capitalist, some wages go to laborers, but a third part is carried by unjust law to one who does nothing for it. Take for illustration a ton of coal ready to be shipped from the mouth of the mine. If the three recipients were paid in kind, one part of the pile would

go to capital, one part to labor, and the third part as royalty to the owner of the mine. That third part, ever increasing with the advance of civilization, is a gift by legislators to an individual who does not own it. That, the greatest part, is earned by all. It exists because of the common demand. It now goes to the individual or corporation instead of to the community, because legislators have gotten into the habit of thus giving away to individuals or private corporations parts of the earth, just so soon as public demand makes them valuable. In this way the coal fields, the iron and copper regions, the oil territory, and now the waterpowers have been taken away from the whole people, for whom they were created, and bestowed upon a very few.

The almost universal existence of these unjust laws explains the industrial war. When the capitalist and his workers come to divide that which they have produced, they find the law-made monopolist stepping in and taking the lion's share. Therefore, the two earners, out of the three participants, haven't enough left to divide amicably. Each fights for what he needs, and the fight will go on until legislators learn to do justice.

The question then arises: Is it possible to correct the wrong which has been done? Have not the representatives of the people entered into a contract with the monopolists for natural opportunities from which they cannot withdraw? That may be so, but in order to reach the end desired, it is not necessary to break any contract. All that is needed is for legislators to exercise the power which they possess of raising public revenues. Our written constitutions give to the law-makers a wide latitude in the method of filling the national, State and municipal treasuries. They confer the power to do very foolish and bad things, as well as the good thing. For instance, all States can and do fine their citizens annually and heavily for building a house or a factory! Although it is idiotic to treat a person (or a corporation), who thus benefits society, as if he had committed a misdemeanor, yet it is done almost universally in every part of the United States.

What each State should do at the earliest practicable moment is to abolish all taxes. Every one admits that they are a tremendous burden and they are wholly unnecessary.

J. W. Bengough, of Toronto, tells the story in a cartoon, showing that the worker who earns \$100. a month pays of that sum \$30. in extra prices, because goods are taxed, and \$15. more in rent because land is not taxed enough, and this total of \$45. accounts for only a part of the burden which taxes impose.

The remedy is to put an end to the monopoly of natural resources by taking economic rent for public purposes. That is to say, the annual value of all natural resources, belonging as it does to the whole people, shall be taken in the form of a tax, (although it is not a tax or burden)—take that and nothing else.

Doubtless that ground rent amounts in the United States to \$10,000,000,000. The taking of it for national, State and municipal expenses would be an unmixed blessing for

all. Multimillionaires would be far better off without their unearned wealth. Land speculators now lose oftener than they gain, and, whether losers or gainers, would be greatly benefited by having their gambling stopped. Homestead owners and farmers, whose land, exclusive of all improvements, is of small value, would pay a low tax, much less than now, if well improved, in addition to the reduced cost of living and large income which would come from a free earth.

What would be the effect of the abolition of taxation? Some answer to this may be found by examining the effect of the abolition of chattel slavery in the South. Ever since the amendment to the Federal Constitution, the former slaves, as before stated, have been able to own property, to acquire an education, to keep their families together. The whites themselves are better off. A few years ago, visiting my youthful home in North Carolina, I took occasion to ask many persons whom I met, especially the elderly men and women: "Would you will slavery back here, if you had the power?" The immediate answer in every instance was an emphatic "No." Indeed, I was told that it would be impossible to find a person in the State who wanted slavery again.

The visitor could see why this sentiment existed. The South is advancing as it never did, and never could, under the incubus of slavery. The only effect upon the masters of the emancipation was that they no longer could sell their workers for a price. They had the service of the blacks as before. Instead of feeding and clothing their servants, a small wage was paid and the employees fed and clothed themselves. In fact, labor became much more efficient, as is shown by the tremendous increase in cotton production.

The abolition of industrial slavery will have a far greater and more widespread influence for good. Not only will the abolition of taxation greatly reduce prices, but the taking of ground rent for public purposes will reduce the price of land to a nominal sum. No longer will it be profitable to own land and hold it idle. Mining lands, arable lands, city lots, in fact every valuable part of the earth, not already in good use, will be upon the market for a few dollars. Indeed, eventually some of these lands may revert to their original owner, the government; and be deeded to citizens upon demand, as was done in the middle of the last century.

The deriving of all public revenue from land values means that the major part of the arable land in the United States, now lying idle, would progressively become cultivated; that the vacant lots, which in most cities exceed in territory the improved lots, would be covered with homes; that the mines, the quarries, the water fronts, the oil regions, the water powers, etc., now monopolized and idle, would be open to use, either co-operatively or otherwise, without money and without price—the only cost being the annual payments, in the form of a tax, of the rental value of the bare land. Anyone desirous of a home, of engaging in market gardening or farming, becoming a merchant or manu-

facturer, or entering into any business, either alone or in company of others, would find free locations ready for his use.

It has been said that when any new thing is proposed, 99 per cent. of the people oppose it. Its advocates are branded with the name of "Propagandists," as a stigma, and sometimes are called "Radicals," a term which in modern parlance means "Reds" or "Bolshevists."

This state of mind is not new. Copernicus met it when he proved that the Sun, and not the earth, was the centre of the Solar system; Columbus was faced with it when he figured that land existed in the Western Hemisphere. And the greatest of all Propagandists was Jesus of Nazareth.

In every instance of this kind, the educated men took the lead in denouncing and ridiculing the discovery.

Just so, when slavery was attacked by the abolitionists, the Southerners, not only the majority who owned slaves, but as one man, repudiated their doctrines, and when possible, applied tar and feathers to their persons. Moreover, when Lincoln was elected, most of the Southern States seceded from the Union and forced a Civil War which almost literally in that section "robbed the cradle and the grave." All this to fight a reform which they now admit, was a great blessing!

Just so it was when Henry George, more than two score years ago, demonstrated the fact that involuntary poverty would cease if all public revenue were derived from the site value of natural opportunities.

His argument may be summed up in the following:

SYLLOGISM

1. Earnings belong to the earner.
2. Economic rent is earned by all.

Therefore, economic rent belongs to all.

It devolves upon the opponents of his theory to refute the above syllogism, or to accept it. The probability is that professors of economics and many other educated men will do neither the one thing nor the other. They cannot refute the logic and, for various reasons, they refuse to accept it.

Probably, it is well that the mass of the people, at this stage of civilization, should be slow to adopt proposed reforms. There are changes which have strong support, but are not true. It is more important to reject an error, than to be ready to accept any new thing. This concession, however, does not apply to persons of education, who think. They should be able to distinguish the false from the true, should denounce the one and uphold the other, and not condemn both contemptuously as "propaganda."

The two essential factors in production are land and labor, As the freeing of one factor, labor, has expanded the property of the South, so the emancipation of the passive factor, land, to an indefinitely greater extent will make all prosperous.

Few persons, if any, have an imagination capable of depicting the effect upon its people of the free earth which

is to come from the abolition of taxation. How easy it will be for human beings to make a good living, to have homes of their own, when they can get freely at the earth with its boundless wealth! Like the squirrels, who can get at their earth, the forest, without money and without price, so men and women, freed from the fear of poverty, can give the greater part of their waking hours to higher things than the keeping together of soul and body. Art, literature, travel, recreation, invention, eloquence, friendship and all the amenities of life will fill the hours of men and women, already educated amply to utilize and enjoy such opportunities. The mass of the people, now either too poor or too rich to reap the best fruits of life, will be happy. Poverty and its oldest son, Ignorance, are the chief sources from which spring the temptations and inducements to crime, vice and war. They cause the many preventable diseases, the premature deaths, and most of the misery which afflicts mankind.

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