

Scholastic Straight-Jackets for Democracy.

Nicholas Murray Butler, the president of Columbia University, made a speech at St. Louis last fall against the Initiative, Referendum and Recall; and this speech the reactionaries are now circulating extensively under Congressional frank as a Senate document. It is a delightful speech, highly classical, intensely grave, passingly gay, politely vituperative, elegant in form, school-mastery in spirit, deferential in manner and altogether a model of how to say instructively and interestingly what isn't worth the saying—or worse. We advise our readers to read it.



When the school teachers of the country, who know much of President Butler and his ways and his manners, call him "Nicholas Miraculous" in lady-like derision, it may seem a weak retort in kind to Dr. Butler's rather more witty and more robust banter; but the miraculous ingenuity of this speech, in which Dr. Butler invokes the principles of democracy to prohibit the practice of it, rather indicates that those teachers, however dull they may possibly be in banter, are intensely keen in perception. And yet, in spite of the ingenuity of this polished "devil's advocate," no reader who resists the hypnotic effect of Dr. Butler's entrancing literary passes will find any difficulty in detecting the breaks in his historical parallels and the fallacies of his over-pretentious logic.



Since Dr. Butler makes scarecrows out of the Initiative, Referendum and Recall, but with all his ingenuity is unable quite to give irresponsible "representative" government a clean bill of health, he ventures upon a suggestion of his own and thereby diggeth a ditch for his whole speech. True political progress, as he views it, "leads to a political practice in which a few important officers are chosen for relatively *long terms* of service, given *much power* and responsibility, and then held to strict *accountability* therefor." Now this is precisely the political practice which the Initiative, Referendum and Recall are designed to secure. But Dr. Butler rejects them as undemocratic. By what means, then, would he hold his few elective officials, with their long terms and much power, to strict accountability? He doesn't say. It is a safe guess that he won't try to say. It is perhaps a safer one that with all his miraculous ingenuity as a "democratic" special pleader for aristocracy, he couldn't say if he tried.

Without the protection of the Initiative, Referendum and Recall, the people would soon find Dr. Butler's *few* elective officials, with *long terms* and *much power*, strictly *without accountability* therefor. This is the testimony of all peoples who have either lacked that protection, or possessed it in crude and inefficient forms; it is the increasingly emphatic lesson of American experience. To have but few elective officials, is highly desirable; to make their terms long is also desirable; to give them much power is sound doctrine. But unless they are held to strict accountability *to the people*, these officials will evolve irresponsible despotisms, as such officials always have—despotisms which can be overthrown only by greater despotisms or by tragical revolutions; and no means for holding them to strict accountability to the people is yet proposed other than the Initiative, Referendum and Recall.



"Natural Laws."

In the country-wide discussion of political, economic, and social problems, one frequently hears mysterious appeals to "natural law." As no details are given, we find ourselves in the dark about the meaning of these impressive terms. Captains of industry talk about "the natural laws of business." Bankers refer to "the natural laws of money and banking." Presidents, Governors, and other functionaries, take the cue and fall in line with the same phrases. What does this glib reference to natural law mean? If there be natural laws governing social problems, why not tell the world what they are? We suggest that somebody make a sort of average of all public utterances by captains of industry, bankers, Presidents, Governors, and other safe and sane men, and issue a treatise in book form under some such title as, "The Natural Laws of Society Inductively Deduced from the Speeches of Experts for the Enlightenment of the Benighted." Such a work would undoubtedly fill a "long-felt want," and in this way the aching void, which various expert gentlemen ache to fill, might be filled and soothed.



Lest it be supposed that we are not in serious mood, we hasten to add that we are very much in earnest. The Public believes that there actually are natural laws governing social problems; and we hail with joy any agreement with this fundamental proposition. We neither hint, nor imply, nor suggest, nor even remotely insinuate, that there are no natural laws of society. What we want is to have these laws understood by as many

people as possible. Hence our suggestion for a treatise. We suspect, however, that if such a treatise were made, it would show that most of those "safe and sane" advocates of natural law are in the same state of mind that Mark Hanna was in when he told the Republican party to "stand pat" and "let well enough alone." When you hear oily talk about natural law, the chances are nine in ten it is all for the cult that worships the god of things-as-they-are. In the eyes of that cult natural law is pretty apt to mean "any old thing" that doesn't disturb respectable graft. To your respectable grafter any variation from the present system would be "unnatural," "artificial," and "highly dangerous."



ASSESSMENT WORK UNDER THE SOMERS SYSTEM.*

With the completion of the assessment of realty in the city of Houston, Texas, under the auspices of Tax Commissioner Pastoriza and Assessor Welsh, and by means of the Somers system, seven cities of the United States have been assessed wholly or in part by Somers system methods.



Along with the agitation and discussion on taxation in every part of the country, there has gone an examination of methods of assessment under present laws. Citizens have begun to see that while they may or may not think it wise to change any of the larger fiscal policies, the time for better methods of assessment of realty for taxation purposes is at hand—especially as no new laws are necessary for the purpose.

*This article, written at the request of The Public by Edward W. Doty of Cleveland, a member of the Ohio Constitutional Convention and chairman of its committee on taxation, is intended to bring down to date the work of the tax valuation department of the Manufacturers' Appraisal Company of Cleveland (of which Mr. Doty is the manager) in promoting the adoption by cities of the Somers system of land valuation. The Somers system was first used in St. Paul by its inventor, W. A. Somers, some twenty years ago, and was first introduced in Cleveland by Mayor Tom L. Johnson about ten years ago. Mayor Johnson afterwards induced the Appraisal company to establish its present tax department under Mr. Doty for promoting the system. The value of the Somers system has been demonstrated in other places than those in which it has been adopted as stated by Mr. Doty; notably in Philadelphia, where its value is generally acknowledged after an extensive demonstration. Its adoption there by the city authorities was prevented by local land monopolists whose tax-dodging it exposed. The growing tendency toward land value taxation gives to experiments with the Somers system special and timely interest. For previous articles on the subject see Publics of February 24, 1911, page 173; and March 10, 1911, page 224.

Equality of assessment interferes not at all with the man who desires changes of an economic nature in the tax laws, nor does it interfere with the notions of the man who desires to retain present methods of taxation, no matter what those methods may be. All citizens realize that whatever the subjects of taxation, land values must bear their share, whether that share be all or only a part of the tax burden. They also realize that the owners of land should carry that proportion of the taxes which the value of their holdings bears to the value of all holdings. In other words, equity and justice are to be desired, so far at least as the relations of individual owners to one another are concerned.



The Somers system being primarily a computation system, by which the value of the whole may be assigned among the owners, to each in proportion to the value of the whole or of any part of the whole, appeals to citizens wherever studied; and those who live in cities where the Somers system has been installed, have for the most part come to see the justice of its principles and the effectiveness of its methods. It is a remarkable fact that even those who have been in the habit of escaping their just share of the tax burdens of a community because inadequate assessment methods have made escape possible, are as a rule complacent in the face of what is to them an increase in the number of dollars that they have to pay into the public treasury after they have witnessed and taken part in an assessment of all the realty of their community under Somers system methods. In every city where the Somers system has been used, many of the so-called "big" owners who have opposed the introduction of this system at the start, have publicly changed their minds after the assessment work was over with—and almost always on the ground that every taxpayer is treated alike. Even these men, who have been allowed to get into the habit of escaping tax burdens because they can, or because they think they have to in self-defense, are really willing to pay their share without protest when they have public evidence, as they have where the Somers system is used, that they are really paying their share and only their share. This fact is one of the collateral benefits of a just assessment, for it is a benefit to any community to have its taxes so laid that its citizens willingly bear their share of the public burden. So far as known, no other assessment method yet used has ever produced any such widespread satisfaction as the Somers system.