

The New Freedom in the West

The Canadian West is determined to play a leading role in the national affairs of this country

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Just as the West will be the controlling factor in the future political life of Canada, so also it is destined to play an increasingly important role in the nation's economic affairs. This is so obvious that we shall not take space to enter into detail, but shall rather outline briefly the economic programme upon which the West will take its stand. Much has been heard in recent years, especially in the United States, of the "New Freedom," which involves not so much an excursion into the unknown, in the realm of politics and of economics, as a restatement and revision of the democratic principles obtaining during the last century. Especially in the West is it felt that the States has hitherto offered larger scope and greater opportunities to capitalists and corporations than to the plain people; and the New Freedom simply means, therefore, that the average man is at length to have the opportunity to make the most of himself, and to obtain a larger share of the products of his labour.

Western Canada, though radical in its outlook and opinions, has been content to follow the East up to the present; but the convention held at Winnipeg indicates plainly that the West hereafter will not only think for itself; but will map out its own course of action as well. In this respect it has looked for leadership across the boundary line rather than to party leaders in Eastern Canada. The American West has always been the seed-bed of ideas and ideals in political and economic life; and although it has never made its will felt decisively in Wall Street, it has on more than one occasion made the business interests of the Republic agree to measures that have curtailed their power. More recently the Non-Partisan League, operating chiefly in the Dakotas, Wisconsin, Montana and Minnesota, has come to the front, and revived many of the old policies of the Populists of a by-gone generation. The Non-Partisans have developed a special strength in North Dakota, where at the last elections they captured two-thirds of the seats in the House, half those in the Senate, elected the Governor, and secured the appointment of the chief State officials. Western Canada has been, naturally enough, directly affected by this movement. In the recent elections in Saskatchewan the Non-Partisan League contested seven constituencies; and although they failed to elect a single candidate, it must not be thought that the West has rejected their programme. The contrary is, indeed, the case. The Non-Partisan League made no headway for the simple reason that the Martin administration had already put into force, or was preparing to put into practice, the greater part—the reactionaries, but solely because Western politics be said that the Non-Partisan League was thrown into the discard not because of the opposition of the reactionaries, but solely because Western political parties are nothing if not progressive. It is safe to say, however, that the Non-Partisan League will come to the front in the near future if any Western administration shows indications of going over to the camp of the opponents of progress.

CHIEF ISSUE.

Economic problems are the chief issues, and not politics, in the West at the present time. Both in the Western United States, and in the prairie provinces there is a feeling of bitterness among the farmers that the East cannot, or at least does not, quite apprehend. This is due to the fact that Western agriculture has been labouring under serious difficulties, on the side of cost of production as well as in the marketing of farm products. The farming interests have carried a crushing burden of taxation, a burden which cheap land, or even free land, could not quite counter-balance. The tools, machinery and necessary appliances of agriculture were heavily taxed; the lumber that went into the shack of the homesteader paid toll to the timber barons; and every item in the schedule of building materials was enhanced in price through a high protective tariff. When the modest little home was finished every article needed for house furnishings cost the farmer from one-third to fifty per cent. more than the fair market price, also because of the indirect taxes levied. Not only did the farmer find himself handicapped, in meeting competitors in the neutral markets of the world, because of this heavy taxation, and hence high cost of production, but he found that only a relatively small part of the pro-

duct of his labour remained in the hands after his goods had been finally marketed. It is in this last particular that the farming interests of the West have felt most aggrieved in recent years.

For a decade and more since, every big corporation in Canada and the United States coming into contact with the farmers of the West has been indefatigable in preaching the gospel of greater production. We may pass by, without comment, all that has been said in this connection since the outburst of war, admitting that it has been supremely essential. But after studying the question at first hand, in the prairie provinces, one begins to get a glimmering, at least, of the resentment of the farmers against the pushing of this programme. The chiefs of the Canadian Pacific, and the late James J. Hill, have done astonishingly good work in building up agriculture in all its diversified branches in the West; but it cannot be said that their efforts have been appreciated to any extent. Nor is this to be wondered at when one recalls that freight rates are much higher in the prairie provinces than in Eastern Canada; and that the Canadian Pacific, on one occasion at least, justified these high rates, which the farmers of the West regard as extortionate, on the ground that its Atlantic lines otherwise could not be made profitable. The same story might be repeated in connection with the banks, the loan corporations, the private elevators, the implement concerns, and many other corporate interests carrying on business in the West. What the farmer did produce paid heavy toll to all these corporations before he secured any reward for his labour. And that reward became smaller as the years went by.

All this led naturally and inevitably to the formation of agricultural associations in the Canadian West, as also in the United States. The United Farmers of Alberta, the Saskatchewan Grain Growers' Association, and the Manitoba Grain Growers' Association came into being to express the united will of Western farmers, and to make that will felt everywhere. As a result the farmers now have co-operative elevators, co-operative wholesale concerns for the distributing of innumerable commodities at wholesale rates to members, and, in the Grain Growers' Grain Company of Winnipeg, a commission agency—organized for profit, to be sure—that has done magnificent service in protecting the farmers' interests. At the present time the United Farmers of Alberta are preparing to unite their elevator business with that of the Grain Growers' Grain Company of Manitoba. Everywhere there is evidence that at length the farmers of the West have found in co-operation and union the instruments essential to protect them against exploitation and the predatory attacks of the big corporations.

We believe that, in this respect, the Canadian West has made more substantial progress than the Dakotas, Minnesota, Wisconsin and other Western American States. In those States the farmers formed the Equity Union to protect their interests; but they have not, through their organization, achieved as much as the various agricultural associations of the prairie provinces. The American West, just prior to the outbreak of war, was labouring under severe economic disabilities. Grain farming, and especially wheat farming, no longer paid—in fact, it was being carried on at a heavy loss. This was due mainly to the state of the land, which had become impoverished under the one crop system. Wisconsin and Minnesota, as well as the Dakotas, had begun to turn to dairying, to cattle raising and the production of hogs to make farming pay. In all these directions much headway had been made; Wisconsin and Minnesota especially making progress in the manufacture of butter and cheese. In 1915 North Dakota marketed 300,000 hogs, showing that splendid progress is being made in the State in mixed farming. But here again the farmers found themselves faced with almost insurmountable difficulties. The marketing facilities were all in the hands of private corporations, and the farmers discovered that they had practically no voice in determining what commissions were to be paid, or what overhead charges had to be met. They had had their eyes fixed so long upon the problems bearing upon cost of production that no effort had been made to deal with those other problems equally vital for their welfare—namely, the problems of distribution.

BECAME IMPATIENT.

It was essential, however, that they face and solve the problem of distribution, not only in connection with the marketing of grain, but of various finished products as well. They were especially concerned with the charges made by private elevators for screening and cleaning grain. It was the common custom on the part of managers of private elevators to charge one cent per bushel for screening and cleaning grain, and to hand over to the farmer the screenings to be used as feed on the farm. It was found, however, that this was, to the farmer, a costly process; and many of them sent forward their grain to terminal points, having it cleaned there. This meant, however, that they lost through the shrinkage in the grain, in the cost of screening, in freight rates and often in the grading of the grain itself. As a result of the losses incurred thereby, as well as in the marketing of other products, there arose a demand for state-owned terminal elevators, abattoirs, mills, packing plants and even state-owned railroads. The agricultural interests became impatient with their own organizations, and determined to enter the political field themselves. The results achieved in North Dakota are as stated above. The main features in their platform is found in the following:—

- State ownership and operation of grain elevators and warehouses.
- State standardization in cleaning and grading grain.
- State-owned flour mills.
- State-owned and controlled cold storage and packing-plants.
- State hail insurance, with provision for compulsory hail insurance on crops.
- Exemption from taxation of farm improvements.
- Establishment of state-owned and state-operated rural credit banks.
- Non-partisan election law.

It is difficult to say how far this farmers' movement will go in the Dakotas to capture the Government at the next elections two years hence. In some respects the movement resembles the Populist agitation of a generation ago; but it differs in this particular at least, that there is less dealing in vague generalities and greater reliance upon direct action. The quintessence of the movement is found in the new attitude of the farmer toward his life and work. He is no longer merely a tiller of the soil, but a business man, a man of action, one who is determined to play the leading role in the economic affairs of his State and nation.

Let it be again emphasized that the Canadian West—the agricultural West—is determined also to play a leading role in the national affairs of this country. Hitherto the farmers have done much, and gained much, by working through their own organizations; and they may be depended upon to continue that policy for the immediate future. At the same time it is significant that the provincial organizations are asking regular party candidates whether or not they subscribe to the principles laid down in the programme of The Canadian Council of Agriculture. Where the party candidate does so subscribe, he is not opposed by a representative of the farmers' organizations; but where he is opposed to the programme, or adopts a dubious position, the farmers themselves intend to put up candidates of their own. Mr. J. A. Maharg, president of the Saskatchewan Grain Growers' Association, has accepted the nomination for Moose Jaw County, and will contest that constituency in behalf of the farmers' interests at the forthcoming federal election. This is significant, and should be taken into serious consideration by those in control of the old-time parties.

The Canadian Council of Agriculture demands that the protective tariff be reduced to a revenue basis; that free trade within a five-year period be established with the United Kingdom; that direct income taxes, corporation taxes, taxes on unimproved land values, and upon large estates be levied; and that the State take over and operate in the interests of the whole nation the railways, express companies and telegraph companies of Canada. The Council also advocates the extension of the federal franchise to women; provincial autonomy in liquor legislation; the abolition of patronage; and publicity of campaign funds. It cannot be denied that this programme appeals strongly to the agricultural interests of the West, as well as radicals everywhere. The Government has already adopted the income tax proposal, and it is only a question of time before other planks of this programme are accepted by the political parties of this country. In any event, the policies and principles of the Council merit, on the part of all, serious study and consideration.