

William Jennings Bryan a Great National Figure

It is just twelve years since Mr. Bryan appeared as a national leader. He looked, with his democracy, like a menace, then; he was called dangerous, impossible. Now he is "not so dangerous as Roosevelt," and is regarded as, at least, a possibility. Bryan is, in a sense, a measure of our progress, writes Lincoln Steffens in Everybody's Magazine. It isn't Bryan that has changed. He is more mature, steadier, quieter, but he is surer, too, and his doctrines are, at bottom, the same. And this is a remarkable fact about this man.

From the moment he raised in protest the "cross of gold," Bryan has taken seriously his leadership of the Democratic party. He has had against him the old leaders and their organization, and he has fought them. But have you ever thought of this?—he has fought the Democratic organization, not with organization methods, but with democracy. He has appealed to the members of it, to the people themselves, and it is their pressure that has counted. Like Roosevelt and Hughes, La Follette and Folk, Bryan has wielded the power of public opinion. To have and to hold this power he has gone up and down this land, day in and day out, year after year, teaching and preaching, pleading, debating, defending; he has been watched; criticised; lauded; but—best test of all—he has been defeated and defeated and defeated.



And he is unchanged. And his organization is unchanging. It hates and it dreads Mr. Bryan as much as the "regular" Republicans hate and fear Mr. Roosevelt. Yet, like Mr. Roosevelt, Mr. Bryan is the acknowledged leader of his party, and all the world acknowledges that he is a loyal leader, sincere, simple, true to his principles, courageous, patient, and full of hope.

In brief, there is no doubt whatsoever about the character of the man. But what does he teach? What are his principles? What does he think the matter is, and what does he propose that we shall do about it?

He answered, as he has always answered, easily. Not, as Taft did; not forgetting that he was a candidate for the presidency. Mr. Bryan never forgets that; and this is no gibe at him. Mr. Bryan has accepted, with thought, all the responsibilities of his leadership.

"When I first realized," he said once when we were resting, "when I saw that I had an influence upon the minds of men, I pledged myself never to forget that this meant for me a moral responsibility, and I never have forgotten it."

And so it is with his responsibility to his party. He is a partisan; I mean that his partisanship goes to the extent of biasing his mind. He excuses some bad chapters in the ancient history of his party. And, in this interview, his sense of his partisan candidacy stood in the way of that free, full expression of his mind which was so winning in Taft. Mr. Bryan thinks some things which he will not say, because they are "not issues now" and, also, because the people are not ready for them. But what Mr. Bryan had to say, he said easily, slowly, and of himself; he was, in an absent-minded way, impatient of questions.

"What the matter is in this country?" he repeated, and his heavily lined face leveled itself in thought. He wasn't puzzled, like Taft; he understood the question, as La Follette did. He had thought about it before.

"But," he began, "there are several ways of answering it." He paused. "It is one problem," he thought aloud, "but several factors enter into it," and, summing them all up, at last, he said:

"There has been a lowering of our ideals of life. The measure of success has been money, and the method by which the money was acquired has not been considered. Hence the lowering of American ideals has led to the debauching of society as well as to the corruption of politics."

"Society in the big sense?"

"Yes. Society in its social, business, and political sense; all the relations of man with man. And, of course, they must be all about equally corrupted, for we cannot separate the political from the social and economic man. If he goes wrong in part, he is apt to go wrong all through.

"Now it is this false ideal which has led to extravagance—in order to keep up appearances; to gambling in business; to disturbing methods in politics; finally to the corruption of government. For the government can be, and it is, used as an asset in business."

"And back of all that?" I asked.

"Wait a minute," he said. "I am speaking now of the evil that can be cured by individual action, and the cure for it; the cure for the lowering of our ideals is to raise our ideals. And that has begun. The tide has turned; the trend today is upward. Men and women are looking to higher, better things, and they must be encouraged to look to higher, better lives. Everybody can help in that."

Mr. Bryan is, as he calls himself, an individualist, and he lays always great stress upon the moral responsibility of each man and woman. But he recognizes the influence of the conditions of life, both in causes and in cures, and when I asked him next what was the cause of the bad ideals, his answer was ready:

"The opportunities to make money fast. We have a rich country, rich, I mean, in natural resources, and we have made prizes of

them for the few. Business has been converted into a wheel of fortune. There were a few large prizes and many blanks. And these prizes have given us false ideals."

But not only the resources of the country were prizes. No. "Invention has multiplied the productivity of machinery and labor; and the man who owned the machine, not the inventor and not the worker, has profited by the rapid multiplication of wealth."

"But these owners of the machines think that they made their money by their own efforts," I suggested. "Aren't they abler than the inventor and the worker?"

"Not always," said Mr. Bryan soberly. But he wasn't thinking of those men; his mind was intent on the moral effect of their "success" on others.

"Their prize-winnings excited hopes which can be realized only in a few cases," he continued. "Just as a wheel of fortune raises in all who play it hopes which only a few can realize."

It was impossible to stop Mr. Bryan there for further analysis of these economic causes and cures; he was headed straight for political issues.

"The greatest invention of this, our era of opportunities for the few," he said, "is the corporation! That is a great machine, good and useful, but a great cause of evil. I am not speaking now of economic evil, nor industrial, but political. I am seeing its use of the powers of the government. Corporations are created by law. And we have made the mistake of creating corporations without sufficiently controlling or regulating them.

"We have allowed railroads, for example, to incorporate. That is perfectly proper. And we have given them the sovereign power of eminent domain. Perfectly proper. But after granting these corporations a part of the state sovereignty on the theory that they were public enterprises for the public service and good, we have allowed them to be conducted as private business. And they have been conducted as private enterprises; as great prizes. They have been managed without regard to the interest of either stockholders or patrons. The directors of railroads have been permitted to water stock and acquire subsidiary corporations, which they bought cheap themselves personally and then sold dear to themselves as controllers or officers of the parent road.

"Why," he said, looking up, "it would take a railroad president fifty years to earn five millions at \$100,000 a year. Sometimes he has made that much in a week by juggling the stock of his own road; buying it in low for himself and selling it high to himself as president. And the many pay. These men have added millions to their wealth by the issue of stocks and bonds predicated upon excessive rates to be paid by the coming generations."

"But those men think," I objected, "that they have done so much for the development of the country that they should be paid more than merely high salaries."

"One moment," said Mr. Bryan, sticking to his own line of thought.

He said that railroads were but one phase of the subject. They were one kind of corporation, the public-service kind, and, before saying what to do about them, he described the other kind, viz.: "that which controls merchandise; not the transportation of goods, but the goods themselves."

"These are the trusts," he said. "Their object is to suppress competition, corner the market, and exploit the country. They offer a great prize—to the few. Our population is so large that a corporation which can control any necessity can make millions by adding a few cents or even mills to the price to the consumer. The increased cost to the consumer on one item looks too small to notice, but when a large number of these monopolies get to work, the total burden is great."

And, going back to his moral answer to the main question, Mr. Bryan traced the consequences to our ideals.

"The unearned income from such organizations demoralizes those who collect it and—looking up to drive home the point—"their 'success' excites imitation and extravagance in others, in the people."

So, you see, Mr. Bryan thinks these trusts have corrupted not only government and business, but also their directors and the people.

Distinguishing clearly between these moral consequences and the economic cause, Mr. Bryan went on to say:

"The great economic evil to be remedied, then, is the unequal distribution of wealth after it is created." He calls the American people the most intelligent producers in the world, and he said we both produce and consume twice as much as any equal population. "But," he feared, "inequality of distribution will finally paralyze production. For it will kill that great stimulus to endeavor; the assurance that the reward will be commensurate with the effort."

Since unequal distribution is the one, fundamental cause of our various evils, what must the remedy be?

"The remedy," Mr. Bryan said, "must be found in an approach to equity." And he took up "two plans that are under discussion," socialism and individualism.

"The Socialist," he said, "proposes to eliminate the employer. The government is to own and operate all instrumentalities of production and distribution.

"The Individualist says that competition is the better regulating force, and he proposes,

therefore, to restore and safeguard competition.

"Our action on all political and economic questions depends upon which of these two points of view we take," he proceeded slowly. And he implied that, consciously or unconsciously, we all choose one or the other of these two positions. He used the trusts to illustrate; and he showed how the promoters of these great organizations are making, unwittingly, of course, but certainly, toward socialism.

"The Socialists," Mr. Bryan said truly, "are for the trusts. They believe that competition is wasteful and that there is an economic advantage in monopoly; so they propose that the government, instead of exterminating trusts, should simply take possession, and, by owning and operating them, give to the whole people the benefits of monopoly."

Mr. Bryan rested a moment, then he proceeded:

"The Individualist believes that the condition, the very principle of private monopoly should be exterminated. Not the industry, of course; on the contrary, the industry should be revived, increased, enlarged, upon a natural, stable foundation."

He was speaking, observe, not now of public-service monopolies; railroads, light, water and gas. These he wished to leave till later in the interview, and, as we shall see, he proposed to try to regulate them. He was thinking now of "merchandise trusts"; oil,

distinction between the railroads and other such public-service corporations, which are natural, necessary monopolies, and "merchandise" corporations, which are artificial and bad. "City water is an example," he said, "of natural monopolies. It is not possible to have several water plants in one city. It is better to make water a monopoly. And, one by one, the cities have learned this and taken possession each of its own one plant. They come naturally to it. They find, first, that they can't have competition; then they find that they can't control a water monopoly. The monopoly won't let them; it goes into politics and it neglects the water. And, having, taken possession, the cities find that the dangers following public ownership are less than the evils of private ownership. The same experience will bring the people to the same conclusion about any public service which must be a monopoly."

The conversation ran off into a comparison of notes, showing how cities everywhere now are struggling with street-railways, gas, electric light, and other public services, trying hard to regulate in the interests of the public and to stop corruption; how these interests fight regulation and redouble their corruption. But Mr. Bryan believes in letting the people find out for themselves what they can and cannot do in the cities.

"I think," he said, "that the people prefer private ownership wherever private ownership is possible, and it is the refusal of franchise holders to deal fairly and honestly with the public which will finally drive us to ownership of natural monopolies in self-defence."

"Isn't there a conflict of interest there?" I asked, "which makes political corruption necessary, economically unavoidable? Take the steam railroads, for an example."

"The steam railroads," he said, "are not so clearly monopolistic as municipal services, but the consolidation of lines and the absorption of competing roads are introducing the monopolistic condition." He cited cases where, in spite of present attempts to "regulate," this merger process was continuing. The natural monopoly is coming naturally, and Mr. Bryan sees it. And as we have seen above, he says in general terms that natural monopolies cannot be regulated. Therefore, the railroads must be publicly owned. Indeed, he spoke his conviction on this point in his speech in Madison Square when he returned from Europe. But he doesn't care to hurry the people in their settlement of the question. He leaves that to the railroads. He will give regulation a fair trial.

"It has failed in all the states except Wisconsin," I suggested.

"And Texas and Oklahoma," he added. "But," he went on, "regulation has not been tried sufficiently to enable the public to pass upon the question whether it can be made effective. The railroads make it ineffective. See how they opposed the Esch-Townsend bill to regulate. They organized their opposition to it, and they were able to prevent the passage of an effective measure. For the law we got was a compromise and unsatisfactory. And the railroads soon learned that they had made a mistake. When the states began to reduce fares and regulate traffic, the roads ran to the federal government for legislation to deprive state legislatures of power to regulate even interstate commerce, and to vest in Congress the exclusive control. And this demand is not in the interest of regulation, of course, but to prevent it. For Congress is not as responsive to the public even as the states are. They are headed, those interests; for the national government, and if they could concentrate all regulative power at Washington, it would simply increase their interest in national politics and make regulation more difficult than it is now."

Mr. Bryan paused, then he referred to the fact that just as the railroads deliver the privileges which corrupt business and facilitate the growth of trusts, so they are the carriers also of most of the big financial and business corruption of politics.

"And," he concluded, "no one who understands the great power and the various uses of the railroad lobby can regard complacently an increase of railroad activity in our national politics."

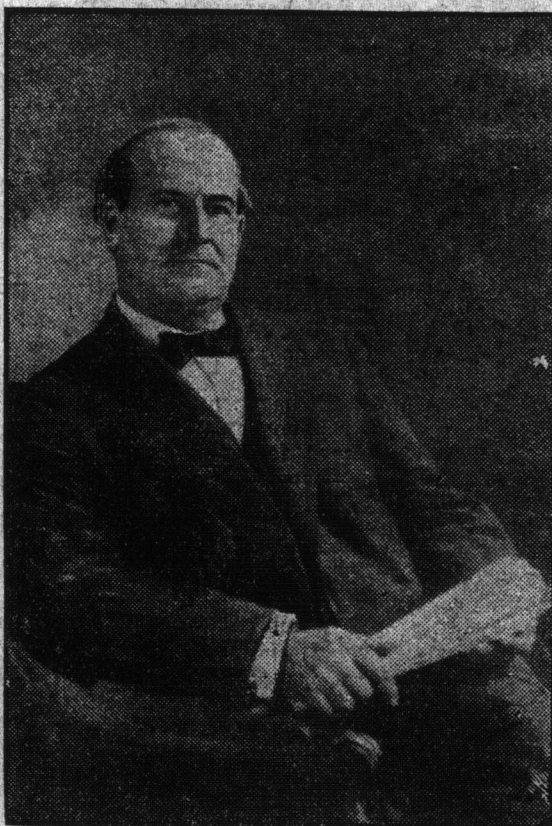
Regulation is impossible; trying to regulate increases the corruption of government. What, then, are we to do? Mr. Bryan says:

"First, we must strengthen the representative character of the government by electing senators by direct vote of the people.

"Second, as to the railroads and other natural monopolies, we must try faithfully and fairly to regulate them till they have taught the people that they cannot be regulated.

"Third, as to the other, the artificial monopolies, we must exterminate them and return to the competitive system. And the ways to exterminate these trusts are several." He gave them:

- 1) Enforce the criminal laws.
- 2) Tariff reform. "I would put on the free list foreign-made articles in competition with domestic trust-made articles."
- 3) "But the most effective way is a national license; not like the president's; his would embarrass legitimate and help illegitimate corporations. It is possible to require a license for corporations controlling, say, twenty-five per cent. This would leave the small corporations untouched. Not more than one in a thousand would be required to take out a license. But a licensed corporation should act under federal supervision till it



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steel, paper, etc. He wouldn't even try to regulate them; they must be forbidden.

"Those who advocate the government control of such trusts go half-way to socialism. For they are granting the Socialist contention that there is an economic advantage in monopoly. They not only declare against competition as a regulating force; they eliminate all questions but two:

"First: Whether the benefits of monopoly shall be enjoyed by all the people or by only a few; and they will hardly contend in the open for the few. So that we come to the

"Second: Whether the state can secure to the people by regulation the benefits of monopoly. And if monopoly is good, and it can't be regulated, then public ownership is inevitable.

"And I believe," he decided, "that regulation of monopolies will be found impossible. Their interests are so large, their power is so concentrated, their means so ample to corrupt and to force out competition, that the monopolists will have constantly an advantage over the people at large, who, suffering each only a little bit, can be brought only by great effort to an effective co-operation in opposition. For example, politically, the candidate for office will always favor regulation, if that plan is decided upon, but the trustees can contribute so largely to campaign funds and can exert so powerful an influence over their employees that the man in office is apt to listen to the trusts rather than to the people. This is exactly what has happened, what happens now, and it will happen in the future."

Thus, then, Mr. Bryan came to two clear conclusions:

- (1) That the trusts are, and that they must continue to be, the great source of our so-called political corruption.
- (2) That the government isn't strong enough to govern (or regulate) trusts.

It is in this second particular, by the way, that Mr. Bryan differs essentially from the president and Mr. Taft, who, believing in the power of the government, would let the trusts grow under the regulation of the law. Mr. Bryan, sceptical of man-made law, would depend upon an economic law, the law of competition.

"I believe," he said, "that competition is a necessary force, and that competition should be relied upon wherever competition is possible. And competition is possible except where, in the nature of the case, one corporation must have the entire business."

Here is where he returns to his important

controls, say, fifty per cent. of the product. Then forbid its further growth."

I was unable to see how the government could regulate such businesses any better than it could railroads, but Mr. Bryan said the government could withdraw the use of the mails, express, telegraph, and railroad facilities from any corporation that is conspiring against the public good. And he proceeded to show how the license system could provide against watering stock and cutting prices to beat competition in one locality. "This method," he concluded, "hits only the man you are after, the monopolist."

Returning to the tariff, Mr. Bryan called it "the great source of privilege and prizes." Manufacturers had been permitted to make the schedules in their own interest and to levy tribute and increase their private fortunes. He would go after the tariff in the public interest: first, making free, as he said above, articles in competition with trusts; then, "cutting materially the tariff on the necessities of life"; and so on down to the revision basis.

Mr. Bryan, unlike the president, does not put the trusts and the labor unions in the same category, nor would he legislate against them together. To Mr. Bryan, unions are associations of men to improve the conditions of labor and living, and they are not at all like combinations to control a commodity. His attitude toward injunctions and other details of the labor question is well known, and I pass that by. What I wanted to know was what we all were to do about this struggle of Labor and Capital, each for a greater share of the profits of production. He said it was a struggle that would never be settled. "We shall gradually approximate to justice."

Certainly this is as bad as Taft's reply, "God knows," when the voice in Cooper Union asked what he proposed to do about the unemployed.

Indeed, these two men—and for that matter all the leaders questioned—do not differ essentially in the final analysis of their programmes. They all want the struggle for survival to go on; it is to be a fair fight, but a fight, and for wealth, too, even between Capital and Labor. Bryan, having had more time to reflect and having lived out West, where the problems of business and politics are clearer and simpler; sees them more definitely than Roosevelt and Taft, who have been men of action always. Bryan sees it more as La Follette does, who, though a man of action, has been occupied also in the West. For example, Bryan goes to the problem of poverty consciously. All his policies are directed, as he himself points out, at excessive wealth, which is, at bottom, the same as excessive poverty. And besides the remedies listed above, he advocates, like the president, an inheritance tax and, more important still, "a tax on incomes as a regular item in our fiscal system." So does Taft advocate these measures; but Bryan sees the relation to other taxes. "An income tax would offset a little the burden of other taxes, which fall most heavily on the poor." The constitutional objection of the Supreme Court Bryan meets with a proposition to amend the Constitution. Taft regards this as unnecessary. Indeed, Taft doesn't want any more legislation than is necessary to make our present laws effective. And there we have a big difference between the two men.

Bryan sees the part privileges play in our system; he sees it clearly as a cause of injustice, and he would legislate and legislate and legislate till he had abolished all the artificial advantages that are granted by government. "Privileges for none, justice for all," he repeats. And he sees how much of our political, commercial, and social corruption would be removed if the government were to cease to be a source of advantages for one man over another.

Taft, a proved executive and a born judge, would depend upon the executive and judicial powers of the government to achieve the same end, more vaguely seen. Bryan is not of the executive type, and there is reason to fear that he is no better judge of men than Roosevelt, to say nothing of Taft; but, seeing the end more clearly, he would not depend so much upon the men he appointed and the courts to prevent and punish evil as he would upon legislation to remove the cause. And, unlike Taft, but very much like Roosevelt, Bryan would preach and teach and lead. For, as he began his talk with our lowered ideals, so he ended it with higher ideals: "We must not only see to it that the government shall take away the prizes that make men pursue a low ideal; we must all of us as individuals strive to lead better lives and to inculcate higher ideals in others." Taft should give us better government of things as they are; Bryan, leading us on to change things, should make us a better people.

A Youthful Sociologist

"Everything has its cause, its simple and striking and satisfactory cause, if we can but find it," said J. McKee Borden, secretary of the Department of Charities, at a banquet in New York.

"Take the question of poverty and wealth. 'Once, in a miserable slum, I heard two little girls beggars talking. 'Why is it,' said the first, 'that the poor is allus more willin' to help us than the rich?'"

"The second answered promptly and bitterly: 'Them wot don't mind givin' is the ones wot stays poor.'"

They are, in fact, the two fundamental principles of the competitive system. The first is that the individual must be free to compete with others on a level playing field. The second is that the government must ensure that this competition is fair and that no artificial barriers are placed in the way of the underdog.

Bryan's philosophy is rooted in a deep understanding of these principles. He believes that the government has a duty to create and maintain a fair competitive environment. This involves not only the removal of artificial barriers, but also the active support of the weak and the oppressed.

His advocacy of public ownership for natural monopolies is a direct result of this philosophy. He believes that when a single entity is the only provider of a necessary service, it has a natural tendency to abuse its power and to create artificial barriers to competition. Public ownership, he argues, would ensure that these services are provided for the benefit of the community as a whole, rather than for the private gain of a few individuals.

Similarly, his support for a national license system for large corporations is based on the same principles. He believes that large corporations have a natural tendency to use their power to crush their smaller competitors. A national license system, he argues, would level the playing field and allow smaller businesses to compete on a more equal basis.

Bryan's philosophy is a challenge to the prevailing orthodoxy of his time. It is a philosophy of social justice and of the common good. It is a philosophy that believes that the government has a duty to ensure that the benefits of the industrial revolution are shared by all, and that no one is allowed to become a permanent underclass.