

Direct Legislation

A Clear Statement of the Principles of Democratic Government and a Convincing Answer to the Opponents of this Reform

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"Mind your own business" is the advice given to the common people of Canada, with impudent reiteration, by party politicians, belted knights, and distinguished exploiters. The public business is the people's business, but, strange to say, when any of the great producing class take an active interest in the public business they are accused of meddling in politics.

Before it became corrupted the word "politics" meant the public business. There is no more important business than politics, and, as it is especially our own business, it is the duty of every good citizen to see that it is conducted on the best possible basis.

The maladministration of the public business benefits only a few, whereas the proper administration will benefit all. To establish the safety, honor and welfare of all the people it will be necessary for us to "cut off the heads of too fast growing sprays that look too lofty in our commonwealth."

Direct Legislation is a means whereby we may increase the political power of the people by placing the government more thoroughly under the control of those whose benefit is its only legitimate object.

Essentially Non-Partisan

This is essentially a non-partisan subject. Go along the country roads and watch the farmers at their toil; go into the factories and workshops and observe the machine makers and the machine users. Look upon the laborers building railways or sewers, or gaze upon the throngs busy in the marts of trade and I defy you to separate the Grits from the Tories.

Irrespective of party or creed they are all busily engaged in the noble art of producing the wealth upon which all must live and in the same spirit they should engage in the construction of a system of government which will ensure a just distribution of that wealth which they toil so hard to create.

Our governments have been able, and, alas, too ready, in the past to grant special privileges by which a favored few have been able to exploit the great mass of the people and as a result a plutocracy has been established in Canada which is a serious menace to the life of the nation. It is, therefore, urgently necessary for the individual and general welfare that we remedy this evil by removing the defects in our government which have permitted it to grow.

The Great Defect

The greatest defect in our government is that we as a people have too little control over our legislators. We cannot compel them to do the things we want them to do, nor to leave undone the things we do not want them to do. They may squander our money and give away our land; they may infringe upon our liberties and barter away our rights by foolish or vicious legislation for personal or party gain, and the only redress we have is to discharge them years after the damage has been done.

It is not necessary for me to give examples of the crimes which have been committed against the people by party politicians. You can find abundant proof of the extent of this evil in the campaign literature of the two great political parties. When rogues fall out honest men learn how they have been robbed and wise men discuss means to remedy the evil.

No wise man would think of submitting to these conditions in his private business. The man who gives another absolute power of attorney over his estate is headed for the bankruptcy court, and the community which unreservedly places its property and rights in the hands of party politicians is headed in the same direction.

In public, as in private business, the

principal should always control the agent. Before we can hope to have the public domain administered for the general welfare we must establish public ownership of the government.

In the past politicians have spurned the petitions of the people, they have violated their pre-election pledges, they have squandered the public money and the public domain, and yet they have had the audacity to appear for re-election and to say that they hoped to be returned to office in order that they might serve the people in the future "as they had done in the past."

Many of us do not wish to be served in the future as we have been served in the past. In the past we have been served with fine words before elections, in the future we wish to be served with fine deeds after elections. That is why we are working for Direct Legislation.

The Party System

There are some persons who still pin their faith to the party system of government. They imagine we can improve conditions by periodically changing the parties in power. We have



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Mr. Dixon's recent speech on Direct Legislation in the Manitoba House is generally acknowledged to have been the most effective exposition of popular government ever heard in a Canadian legislature.

been trying that system in Canada for over 70 years without any marked success. While a political party is in opposition it is usually the reform party, advocating certain clear cut principles, but when the party obtains office it too often wraps those very principles up in tissue paper and stows them away in a burglar-proof safe until the party is once more turned out of office. Then the old principles are brought forth again just as good as new.

This dilly-dallying with important public questions has been altogether too common in Canada, and, quite naturally, the people, who need certain reforms, are determined to find a more certain way of securing them. Hence the demand for Direct Legislation.

Even if the present uncontrolled party system, per se, were perfect, it would still be a very unsatisfactory method of conducting public business. For example, a party platform may contain ten planks. A voter may be in favor of six of these planks and be opposed to four, not an unusual occurrence by any means. In an attempt to support measures which he favors the voter is compelled to support measures to which he is opposed. This is irritating to the voters. It is also

confusing to legislators, because it makes it difficult to decide what is the real state of public opinion. Direct Legislation allows the voters to express their opinions definitely upon each separate measure. Thus it provides a means whereby public opinion is accurately registered and makes the duties of legislators easier and more satisfactory to the people whom they represent.

Direct Legislation does not destroy political parties. So long as men differ on public questions parties will remain, but it does soften the asperities of party conflict, and, no matter which party may be in power, it ensures that the will of the sovereign people shall always prevail.

Well meaning individuals frequently suggest that the way to cure our political ills is to elect better men into office. "Vote for the man, not for the party" is their slogan. The practice of this principle has also led to serious disappointment.

Well Recommended

It is difficult to tell whether a man is going to prove a good or bad man for the people by listening to his pre-election speeches. A story is told of a certain American senator who was once addressing an open air meeting in Texas. While he was speaking a couple of negroes lounged up to the edge of the crowd. Listening for some time one asked the other: "Who am dat man, Sambo?" and his companion replied, "Ah don't know what his name am, but he suttinly do recommen' his-self mos' highly." Political candidates are usually well recommended and the strength of their recommendations seldom bears any relation to their after actions.

A man may be a model of virtue in his private life, he may go regularly to church, pay his debts, be temperate and industrious, he may be an excellent husband and father, yet, in spite of all these virtues, if, after he is elected, he votes against a popular measure he ceases to be a representative and becomes a misrepresentative of the people who elected him.

A Difficult Choice

Under our present system of nominating candidates one man is usually brought forward by each of the two great political parties and the voter is compelled to vote for one of two candidates or stay away from the polls. Quite frequently the voters are in a similar predicament to the old lady who was one time giving evidence before Mr. Plowden, the celebrated London police magistrate.

Mr. Plowden was trying a man for burglary and the prisoner's wife was put into the witness box. Mr. Plowden asked "Are you the wife of this burglar?" The woman replied in the affirmative. "Did you know that this man was a burglar before you married him?" asked Mr. Plowden. Once more the answer was "Yes." "Now, my good woman," said Mr. Plowden, "Perhaps you will tell this court how you came to marry this man, knowing that he was a burglar." "Well, sir, you see it was this way," said the woman, "I was getting old and I had to choose between a burglar and a lawyer."

Voters are sometimes compelled to make a similar choice. As many of them say, they try to choose the lesser evil, and then spend the time until the next election wondering if they have succeeded or not.

Vote on Measures

Under Direct Legislation the men are separated from the measures and it is possible for the voter to register his vote for what he considers the better man and the better measures. This makes for the election of better men and better measures, and lifts the whole public business to a higher plane.

Much more might be said of the evils which have sprung up under our system of lawmaking by uncontrolled representatives, but it is far more important to discuss the ways and means of remedying these evils. Direct Legislation is the key to the situation. Once this is established the people can get any other reform as soon as the majority desire it.

Initiative and Referendum

Direct Legislation means law-making by the direct vote of the people. It consists of the Initiative and Referendum. The Initiative is a measure by which a certain percentage of the voters, usually eight per cent., may propose a law by means of petition. If, upon the presentation of the petition, the Legislature refuses to pass the law it must be submitted on a separate ballot to all the voters for their approval or rejection at the next general election, or at a special election if so ordered.

In the bill drawn up by the Direct Legislation League of Manitoba it is provided that these elections shall not be held oftener than once in two years. This provision was inserted to guard against any danger from too frequent elections. It was felt that the people would only desire to vote upon important public questions and a slight delay in taking the vote on important matters would be beneficial in that it would give the advocates and the opponents of the measures to be voted upon ample time to present their arguments to the people.

Twelve Thousand Signatures

The Initiative would give to 12,000 electors outside the Legislature as much power as one elected man now has inside the Legislature. Any legislator may propose a law which is to govern the whole of the people of Manitoba, and, if he can persuade a majority of the members of the Legislature to vote for his measure, it will go into effect. Surely not even the most prejudiced opponent of this reform would contend that any one man inside the Legislature has more brains, more wisdom, or more virtue than 12,000 of the voters of Manitoba. It should be pointed out that if there is any considerable opposition to the law proposed by the necessary 12,000 voters it cannot become law until it has been submitted to a referendum vote of the whole electorate and the majority of those voting will decide whether the proposed law will be accepted or rejected. The Initiative is a measure by which the voters may start legislation.

The Referendum is a measure by which the voters may stop legislation. Where the Referendum is in force all laws are suspended for a period of time after they have been passed by the legislature, usually for ninety days. If, during that time, a certain percentage of the voters, usually five per cent., petition that any particular law be referred to the people for their approval or rejection before it comes into force, it must be so done. The principal advantage of the Referendum is that it gives the people the power to prevent the bartering away of public lands and public franchises to private corporations, thus destroying the power of the lobby and tending to purify politics.

Surely, if 7,500 voters disapprove of a law and protest against it, they have the right and should have the power to appeal to the whole of the electorate for a verdict, instead of being compelled, as they now are, to abide by the decision of a majority of fifty legislators. It is impossible for fifty men, no matter how wise they may be, to estimate correctly the state of public opinion on all questions. The Referendum will ensure that no legislation will be passed without the expressed

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