

THE TARIFF: A MORAL ISSUE¹

Whenever men just like ourselves—probably not much better, and certainly no worse—continually fail to give us the results we have a right to expect from their efforts, we may just as well make up our minds that the fault lies, not in their personality, but in the conditions under which they work; and profit comes, not from denouncing them, but in seeing that the conditions are changed. This is especially true of tariff-making. It has been conclusively shown, by experiments repeated again and again, that the methods of tariff-making by Congress, which have now obtained for so many years, cannot, from the very nature of the case, bring really satisfactory results. I think that the present tariff is better than the last, and considerably better than the one before the last; but it has certainly failed to give general satisfaction. I believe this country is fully committed to the principle of protection; but it is to protection as a principle; to protection primarily in the interest of the standard of living of the American workingman. I believe that when protection becomes, not a principle, but a privilege and a preference—or, rather, a jumble of privileges and preferences—then the American people disapprove of it. Now, to correct the trouble, it is necessary, in the first place, to get in mind clearly what we want, and, in the next place, to get in mind clearly the method by which we hope to obtain what we want. What we want is a square deal in the tariff as in everything else; a square deal for the wage-earner; a square deal for the employer; and a square deal for the general public. To obtain it we must have a thoroughly efficient and well-equipped tariff commission.

The tariff ought to be a material issue and not a moral issue; but if instead of a square deal we get a crooked deal, then it becomes very emphatically a moral issue. What we desire in a tariff is such measure of protection as will equalize the cost of production here and abroad; and as the cost of production is mainly labor cost, this

means primarily a tariff sufficient to make up for the difference in labor cost here and abroad. The American public wants the American laboring man put on an equality with other citizens, so that he shall have the ability to achieve the American standard of living and the capacity to enjoy it; and to do this we must see that his wages are not lowered by improper competition with inferior wage-workers abroad—with wage-workers who are paid poorly and who live as no Americans are willing to live. But the American public does not wish to see the tariff so arranged as to benefit primarily a few wealthy men.

As a means toward the attainment of its end in view we have as yet devised nothing in any way as effective as a tariff commission. There should be a commission of well-paid experts; men who should not represent any industry; who should be masters of their subjects; of the very highest character; and who should approach the matter with absolute disregard of every outside consideration. These men should take up in succession each subject with which the tariff deals and investigate the conditions of production here and abroad; they should find out the facts and not merely accept the statements of interested parties; and they should report to Congress on each subject as soon as that subject has been covered. Then action can be taken at once on the particular subject concerned, while the commission immediately proceeds to investigate another. By these means log-rolling would be avoided and each subject treated on its merits, while there would be no such shock to general industry as is implied in the present custom of making sweeping changes in the whole tariff at once. Finally, it should be the duty of some Governmental department or bureau to investigate the conditions in the various protected industries, and see that the laborers really are getting the benefit of the tariff supposed to be enacted in their interest. Moreover, to insure good treatment abroad we should keep the maximum and minimum provision.

The same principle of a first-class outside commission should be applied to river and harbor legislation. At present a river and harbor bill, like a tariff bill, tends to be settled by a squabble among a lot of

¹This article is in substance what Mr. Roosevelt said on the question of the Tariff in his speech at Sioux Falls, South Dakota, on September 3.—THE EDITORS.

big selfish interests and little selfish interests, with scant regard to the one really vital interest, that of the general public. In this matter the National Legislature would do well to profit by the example of Massachusetts. Formerly Massachusetts dealt with its land and harbor legislation just as at Washington tariff and river and harbor laws have been dealt with; and there was just the same pulling and hauling, the same bargaining and log-rolling, the same subordination of the general interest to various special interests. Last year Governor Draper took up the matter, and on his recommendation the Legislature turned the whole business over to a commission of experts; and all trouble and scandal forthwith disappeared. Incidentally, this seems to me to be a first-class instance of progressive legislation.

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