

Editorial: The Genesis of Politics

In his summing up for the Gravesend boss John Y. McKane, ex-Judge Troy said: “Politics have no more charms for John Y. McKane. If he is acquitted now he will never again mix himself up in them.”

It is possible that ex-Judge Troy is better posted on the genesis of politics than these words indicate, and that in using them it was merely the advocate who spoke, trying to get by the insinuation of a promise “never again to do so” the acquittal of the culprit he was defending. It is also possible, and even likely, that ex-Judge Troy meant what he said. If he did, he shares a very vulgar and unscientific notion about politics.

No doubt there are people who “go into politics” for the same reason that some deliberately go into the pursuit of stealing—for the excitement of the thing. Such people—whether they go into politics or take to stealing—are but the exception. They are the victims of a sort of insanity, and McKane has given no evidence of belonging to this category.

With the exception of these mental freaks, it is a positive fact that nobody goes into politics but as a result of his economic necessities. The masses who do so fall into two leading categories, both of which have the “knife and fork” or “bread and butter” problem uppermost on their minds. The one set takes to politics as a means by which to get bread and butter; the other, as a means to prevent their getting out of bread and butter.

Daniel De Leon

The first of these two leading categories is again divisible into two sub-classes, each of which is animated by a very different moral principle. One sub-class consists of the self-seeking politician who trades in votes as he would in wooden nutmegs. He is either a bankrupt, from some pursuit or other, or is inherently a worthless being. Either having failed in some regular line of work, or never having had any, and believing politics to be an easy pursuit, he has taken to that. The other sub-class under this first division consists of the intelligent proletariat, the New Trade Unionists or, say, the Socialists. They realize that the system of government, the sort of men who are in office, are all matters that go directly to the wages or “knife and fork,” or “bread and butter” question; they have no cobwebs in their heads with regard to the old “records” of the old parties; they see clearly that their own class must hold the reins of government if they are to live; and they give close attention to politics, calling upon their fellow toilers to drop their old party superstitions and conquer the public powers. This sub-class is identical with the other sub-class in the one respect that they both feel driven to take to politics as a means to get bread and butter by, but they differ in this important moral respect that, while the former uses politics for his own selfish purposes at the expense of others, the latter uses politics for the benefit of all.

There remains the second of the two leading categories, that which consists of people who take to politics as a means, not to obtain, but to prevent their getting out of bread and butter. This class consists of the wealthy. The greater their wealth the more necessary is politics to them. Unless they are in politics they can not wield those powers that are necessary and serve to curb the working class, or that are necessary and serve to protect one rich plunderer against the plundering schemes of another. Directly or indirectly, the wealthy are bound to be up to their eye-brows in politics.

John Y. McKane belongs to the latter category. He has not failed in private enterprise, neither is he an intelligent

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proletarian striving by peaceful methods to conquer the public powers so as to abolish the capitalist system of exploitation; he needs no politics to get bread by. But he is a rich man, grown rich by somewhat more shameless methods than his class, but substantially by its methods, politics are necessary to him to keep his property.

Whether in or out of jail, whether he was convicted or not, whether politics did or did not “retain their charms” for him, John Y. McKane will and must continue in “politics.”

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