Prohibition — David O. McKay


PROHIBITION AS PUBLIC POLICY

The Question of Repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment (1933). I should like to say a few words regarding a great question that is related to the general theme of this conference. Our nation is facing it, and we as part of that nation must express ourselves regarding it. I have in mind the question of the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

“Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of Truth with Falsehood, for the good or evil side;
Some great cause, God’s new Messiah, offering each the bloom or blight,
Parts the goats upon the left hand, and the sheep upon the right,
And the choice goes by forever ‘twixt that darkness and that light”

James Russell Lowell, The Present Crisis

When James Russell Lowell wrote those lines, he had in mind the great problem of slavery — “The earth-born Cyclops, fellest of the giant brood.” In that issue the people of the United States chose sides, and the struggle, though bitter and tragic, ended in driving one form of slavery from our shores forever.

Today the liquor question, another earthborn giant, stalks through the land, and the question of how best to shackle him is now put squarely before the people. Fewer than fifteen years have passed since the Eighteenth Amendment was ratified by the largest number of states and by the largest percentage of states that ever ratified any amendment to the Constitution in the entire history of our country.

That action was taken as the cumulative result of several hundred years’ experience with the evils of the liquor traffic. Now after a little more than a decade of prohibition, because of a few difficulties in enforcement, many people cry for a return to old conditions. It was just such sudden changes in the public opinion and acclaim that made James Fitz James cry out:

“Thou many-headed monster thing,
O who would wish to be thy king!”

Sir Walter Scott, Lady of the Lake

This reversal of sentiment is due in general to one of two conditions — perhaps both. Either prohibition has failed to achieve the results anticipated, or the people finding themselves in such desperate financial straits are being swept off their feet in their eagerness to grasp anything which offers relief.

When the world war broke out, many men cried, “Christianity has failed.” Just as they now cry, “Prohibition has failed.” Others answered then that Christianity had never been tried, that it was the violation of Christian principles that brought on the war. So we answer today: Prohibition has not failed; it has not been sufficiently tested. If public sentiment is against it, prohibition cannot be enforced, but if the majority of people favor it, it can be enforced. Now we are engaged in the struggle to test that sentiment.

The Case for Prohibition. Three reasons why the Eighteenth Amendment should not be repealed:

Because prohibition is the most effective means of dealing with the liquor evil. I believe that the results of honest investigation and unbiased observation prove the truth of this assertion; for example, arrests for drunkenness in fifty leading cities, statistics of which were collected by a judge of the Municipal Court of Chicago, fell from 302,071 in 1917 to 110,149 in 1920 — a decrease of 63 percent.

Mr. Robert Carradini made a survey of 185 cities, the complete statistics of which show that the average annual number of arrests for intoxication per thousand of population in the four years preceding 1917 was 23.4 percent and that number in 1920 had fallen to 8.7 percent, a reduction of 62 percent.

Figures presented before the sub-committee of the Committee on Judiciary, United States Senate, April 1926, showed data covering statistics in 626 cities from 1917 to 1920. The number of arrests for drunkenness in all these 626 cities was less than 36 percent as great in 1920 as in 1917. From the same authority we learn that prison commitments decreased 59 percent, and there was a decrease of crime of over 40 percent.

It is true that since that time anti-prohibitionists can cite statistics showing: (1) an increase of arrests for
drunkenness since 1920, (2) an increase of deaths from alcoholism since 1920, (3) an increase in insanity since 1920. They can show further that in 1924 the arrests for drunkenness were double what they were in 1920, but even then they were less than three-fourths of what they were before prohibition.

**Moral and Economic Benefits of Prohibition.** Early in 1922 the Manufacturers’ Record sent a questionnaire to hundreds of leading men of affairs including large manufacturers, employers of labor, bankers, and university professors asking their judgment about prohibition. Ninety-eight and one-half percent favored prohibition in some form. Some of the moral and economic benefits as they appeared to these men follow:

- Happier homes with more contentment. Cleaner and better social life.
- Increased purchasing power of homes, food, and clothes for women and children.
- A change in the habits and expenditures of the workers. Men are buying their own homes, have savings accounts, and own automobiles.
- A tendency toward thrift, contentment, comfort, and happiness. Families better cared for, and increased savings deposits.
- More and cleaner recreation. Picture shows, parks, outdoor excursions.
- Less loss of time. Few accidents, less incompetence, less carelessness, less inefficiency, better work, better homes.
- Children and young people getting a better education.
- School attendance improved. Public and Sunday School.
- Improvement in community morale.
- An incalculable economic and moral blessing to millions of our people and ot the nation as a whole.

**The Fundamental Principle in Individual Government.** In my advocacy for prohibition I keep ever in mind the importance of that great principle which Joseph Smith enunciated when he was asked how he governed his people so well. He answered: “I teach the people correct principles, and they govern themselves.” That is the fundamental principle in the United States in individual government, and when an individual becomes converted to a condition, he can live up to it. When we get the majority of the people converted to a condition that will favor temperance, the law will be enforced.

But there is another condition, also. We are living in a democracy. The majority of the people determine the kind of laws by which the people should be governed. That being true we are now facing a proposition to determine what the majority of the people desire. I believe that the American people desire temperance. I have given one reason why I think that the retention of the Eighteenth Amendment will foster and favor temperance.

**Repeal a Step Backward.** There is a second reason which I will just name and that is the proposed amendment offers no new remedy for existing evils. If the Twenty-first Amendment is ratified, the question of prohibition is thrown back upon the states and is one step backward in the cause of temperance. The smaller the prohibitive area, the greater the difficulty of enforcement; the wider the area, the more effective the enforcement.

You who were on the firing line in this prohibition fight will remember how we first began to make towns dry, then counties, then states, and finally the question was made nation-wide. Now to change and go into the states as proposed by the Twenty-first Amendment is merely to take a step backward.

**Need of More Spirituality.** A third reason for my opposing the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment is this:

- The world today perhaps as never before needs more spirituality. Booze and depravity mingle together harmoniously, but booze and spirituality, never.

In an excellent editorial one of our daily papers impressively said: “Excessive materialism stands indicted in the minds of men. There needs to be inaugurated a new era of mutual accord, a return to an appreciation of the finer things of life, to the basic principles of human existence.”

No one will contend that intoxicating liquors contribute spirituality either to the individual or to the nation. Nearly everyone concedes that intoxicants develop the baser, not the finer, things of life.

Sixteen years ago there was a terrific battle being waged at Verdun. On June 7, 1916, the French vacated the city Damploup under the hill on which Fort Vaux was situated. The defense of this fort was one of outstanding heroism, and Major Raynal, the commander, was treated with every honor as a prisoner of the
Germans.

Fort Vaux had fallen, and other outer lines were broken through, but there was an inner circle of defense that was invincible. The words of General Petain, "They shall not pass," thrilled the heart and nerved the arm of every French soldier. For more than two long months the Germans hammered and battered at that inner defense in the most terrific conflict in the annals of war. In the last desperate assault of the Crown Prince, 40,000 German soldiers were slaughtered in a hopeless effort to break through the French curtain of fire. The inner circle of defense was impregnable. The main line held.

Today we witness the legalization of beer by the United States government. One of our outer defenses has fallen, and the enemy spurred on by victory will attack others. But the inner defense, the Eighteenth Amendment, must be defended at all costs. Let the words of General Petain, "They shall not pass," strengthen every heart and nerve every hand in defense of this part of the Constitution of the United States.

In addition to the fact that we believe that prohibition is the best means of fighting the evil, that the proposal of the Twenty-first Amendment offers no other remedy which we do not have, and that the cause of spirituality demands that we retain it, I will add in conclusion this thought:

Out of the high plane of spirituality comes the message from the President of the Church given to the world that intoxicating liquors, strong drink, and tobacco are not god for man. That is God's word given authoritatively, and on that truth we stand. — CR, April 1933, pp. 90–94.

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There are those who blame prohibition for the wave of lawlessness that has been sweeping over the country, but since the repeal, the illicit traffic in booze still continues unabated. Drunkenness is increasing, and so is the number of intoxicated drivers who imperil the lives of innocent people on the public highway. In the use of tobacco the law is flagrantly violated and dishonored.

Note the following: “Any person who sells, gives, or furnishes any cigar, cigaret, or tobacco in any form, or any opium or other narcotic in any form to any person under twenty-one years of age is guilty of a misdemeanor.” And again, “Any person under the age of twenty-one years who buys, accepts, or has in his possession any cigar, cigaret, or tobacco in any form, or opium or any other narcotic in any form is guilty of a misdemeanor or shall be deemed a delinquent child as the case may be.”

_VIOLATIONS BODE ILL FOR SOCIETY._ It augurs ill for society when in the face of such a law on the statute books, many high school boys from fifteen to nineteen years of age indulge openly in this pernicious habit. That such violations occur constantly in our own community, none can deny.

Petty thefts, holdups, and robberies of various kinds and degrees are all too common.

Illegal possession of corporate property is a new menace. Millions of dollars are being lost to laborers, and bitter animosities engendered by sit-down strikes, a new weapon in the hands of unionism which may prove a boomerang to honest labor. If lawlessness or even disregard for the rights of employees on the part of employers is the cause of sit-down strikes, then the menace of such strife to the stability of society is only increased.

These things which I have merely named indicate the trend to disregard law and order. Of all crushing taxes that impede the economic of the American people, the crime tax is the greatest. — CR, April 1937, pp. 28–29.