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GOVERNMENT FOR THE PEOPLE

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Walters 12/24/44*

Should Liquor Talk?

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Part 2

In last Sunday's column I briefly touched upon the liquor question here in Delaware. I now propose to take up in more detail each aspect of this social stumbling block and will leave it to the conscience of the reader how he will view the bill that promises to come before the legislature.

First, let me say, that while I, myself, do not drink I consider it my solemn obligation to defend the rights of all men and women who choose to drink.

I do not think that I or any other man, or any group of men have the moral right to stop a fellow citizen from drinking if he so chooses and through his act does no one mischief.

Thus, while the Rev. Ivanhoe Willis, superintendent of the Anti-Saloon League, and acting agent for the Law and Order Society of Delaware, has commended the Liquor Commission for having refused to issue further retail liquor licenses for the remainder of the year, I must protest his attitude if not that of the commission's.

And I must protest his commendation on the grounds that his attitude is antagonistic to every man's right of self-employment and self-department.

What precisely is the Liquor Commission doing by denying applicants the right to open retail liquor stores? It is presumed by many well-meaning citizens that it is cutting down on drunkenness at their source. But is it? Actually it is accepting the responsibility of determining what the public demand for a commodity really is. It is making it harder for legitimate business men to operate, it is making it difficult for lawabiding citizens to get what they want where they want it.

Does the commission know the demand for a commodity? It assumes such knowledge. It arbitrarily decides the number and the approximate location of each store. This is an extremely dangerous duty to perform, for it then takes upon itself the superior wisdom of predetermination, a knowledge that the Almighty never endowed any individual with, and which is the cause for the breakdown and failure of every government that has entered into business, that has become socialistically minded.

I know a man who wanted to open a retail liquor store. He met all of the qualifications but was refused on the grounds that there was already one store in that vicinity. I don't question the reason given or the legal right of the Commission to so rule, but by this ruling it denied a man the privilege of self-support that might have accrued at that location. But the Commission refused him on the ground that there already was one store.

Is the Liquor Commission dedicated to protecting an incumbent against the competition of newcomers? By the same token should we not preclude dry goods merchants from congregating on Market street, of heavy chemicals from coming to Delaware, of churches from having three within a radius of five blocks, of grocery stores from having adjacent buildings, of automobile showrooms from being across the street from each other? If a man wishes to take the risks incumbent of opening a new place of business, that should be his responsibility. If the potential customers do not like him or what he sells he will be forced by economic pressure to vacate. I hold that it is not the duty or right of the Liquor Commission to decide who shall be favored with a happy hunting ground of a designated area, free from other liquor men's competition. As long as the merchant meets his taxes, pays his bills, conducts himself with propriety and is wanted by the community, as evidenced by his trade, he is rendering a service, and it is our moral duty to protect him in his right.

We have allowed fear of the evils resulting from the misuse of alcohol to deny our fellow citizens their inherent rights.

I agree with and commend the Rev. Mr. Willis in his desire to see less abuse of intoxicants, and I believe that through liberalization and education we will advance temperance far more rapidly than by prohibiting and Blue Law enactments. Possibly the Rev. Mr. Willis was pleased because he felt that there would be one less source for the sale of liquor, and saw in the denial of the applicants a diminution in the ultimate consumption of intoxicants. However, the goal of diminishing the amount of liquor consumed, will in all probability not be satisfied. During

Prohibition when legally none was sold, few who wanted it went dry, and it is folly to assume that what did not work during Prohibition days will work now that we can buy liquor.

Let us consider the following: We have in Delaware, so I am told, approximately four hundred stores and taprooms, and between sixty and seventy drinking clubs. None of these would exist if the public did not want to support them. Let us not damn men who sell us what we want. Now, if drinking is evil, where does most of it occur, in the stores, or in the clubs and taprooms? Which are there more of? There are vastly more taprooms and clubs than there are stores. And by the law drinking is forbidden at the stores.

Most men who drink at home do not get intoxicated. Where wine and liquor is on the table it is seldom abused. In continental Europe, where wine and alcoholic beverage is taken at the table in preference to water, there is little abuse, but in England, where the corner pub is the axis of the community, the evils of intemperance are most strongly discerned. The same holds true here in Delaware. With our midnight curfew, friends who gather in the taverns and clubs try to beat the dead line. The human body can tolerate amazing quantities of foods, stimulants, and poisons if given slowly over a period of time, but after moderate drinking and with the approach of the deadline there is usually "Just another round," and then "let's get another before twelve."

The result is that gradual drinking gives way to a determined effort to beat our curfew and by midnight there are a lot of men and women who are maudlinly drunk. In Europe, where drink has little tax burden, and where accordingly it is very cheap, a man does not take a friend to a tavern and to show his regard try and drink him under the table.

In England where even a glass of beer is heavily taxed, a poor man considers it an honor to have a drink with a friend and must return the compliment in kind. It is this treating, in England and here, that makes men lose their sense of values.

The Commission cannot stop drunkenness by trying to make drink scarce. We have had one taste of that. Rather it must take the treat value out of drink, and of this I will speak later.