

New Campaign for Prohibition

APROPOS OF THE EFFORT being made to re-enact legislation intended to prohibit the liquor traffic, and because revival of the question must subject us once again to the necessity of taking a position, pro or con, in its discussion, it may be as well for us to make sure of our convictions in advance.

To compare the supposed beneficial and injurious effects of liquor drinking on the individual or on society gives no hope of an answer to the question of whether government is justified in prohibiting the liquor traffic. The question goes far deeper. There are many practices injurious to the individual that might well be eliminated, but to the elimination of which government cannot commit itself without going beyond its proper functions, and thereby, in the long run, doing more harm than good.

The question of prohibition falls within the limits of the much larger question as to what are the proper functions of government; and in the answer to this larger question we shall find what can be found nowhere else: the answer to the more limited question. Without a basic principle by which to test the legitimacy of any governmental activity, actual or proposed, we are at sea in a rudderless ship,—as are, indeed, practically all of those whose arguments fill the columns of the press in the discussion of the merits and demerits of governmental regulation in any given field.

What, then, is the basic principle by which to make the test? We find it in the Declaration of Independence, where the function of government is recognized to be the protection of the individual's unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Unless we are able to recognize this principle in a law, we should reject it. Government should go no further in its activities than to see that the individual is left free to live his own life, as he may please, up to the point of infringing the equal right of all others.

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