

Lobbying in Washington

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Washington, D. C., May 11

THE profession, trade, or art of lobbying has become so well established and so lucrative that legislation is now pending to control or prohibit it. One bill has already passed the Senate and is now being considered in the Judiciary Committee of the House. Five or six similar bills, more or less drastic, are pending in the House. In all likelihood one of these bills will pass and everybody will vote for it. To vote against it requires too much explaining, and those who do are likely to be misunderstood.

The strange part of it is that the lobbying law will no more prevent lobbying than prohibition prevents drinking. The vicious lobbyist who does his work by corrupt means will continue his nefarious practice; a little thing like a law will not faze him. This gentleman never operates in the open and seldom operates in Washington. He does not come in contact with elected Representatives in the House or Senate. He has better and more effective contacts. The fake lobbyist will welcome the law. He has no influence. He could not prevent or obtain the passage of a single bill. He maintains offices in Washington, sends out copies of bills introduced, obtains "information," and issues regular "bulletins" or "reports." He lives on the credulity of people whom he impresses with his importance and makes believe that he is serving. This type of lobbyist, and there are many in Washington, will be the first to register. He will adorn his letterhead with the proud legend: "Legally Registered Legislative Representative"—a high-sounding title and strictly in keeping with the law. In fact, the proposed law will add to the importance of these nonentities. It will not hurt the faker and it will not deter the rogue.

No honest legislator who does his work conscientiously fears any lobbyist. In fact, the lobbyist knows better than to approach such a legislator. A legislator is very much like a woman walking the streets of a great city. If she looks for annoyance from a masher, she can generally find it. Equally attractive women minding their own business are seldom annoyed or molested on the streets. So it is with the legislators. If they are busy doing their work according to their conscience, they have no time to notice the goo-goo eyes of the lobbyist.

The joke of it is that so little actual lobbying is done in Washington. The real lobbyists are paid big fees by big interests and their base of operations is back home near the post of command. No lobbying law will be able to reach them. They work under cover and will not register, law or no law. Their contact is with political bosses.

Thus it happens that a member, no matter how carefully he guards himself against the influence of the glib-tongued lobbyist in Washington, may, in simply discussing legislation with his political leaders at home, be unconsciously influenced by men who have been contaminated by the lobbyist. In all likelihood the renomination or even the reelection of the Representative may depend upon the good-will of his influential political friends at home. A thoroughly honest but weak legislator who would indignantly spurn the suggestion of a lobbyist may willingly

accept the craftily bestowed advice of a political boss.

No lobbying was carried on in Washington when the purchase of the Cape Cod Canal was voted. Yet there was a great deal of lobbying on the outside. The bondholders were exceedingly anxious to recoup by dumping a bad investment on the government. That bill went through like greased lightning. Delegation after delegation voted for it. It created little public interest, so the lobbyists had an easy time. Important, novel, or progressive measures, such as Boulder Dam, Muscle Shoals, farm relief, anti-injunction bills, or a child-labor amendment, have all been affected by "negative" lobbying. In behalf of the same proposals, there has been a great deal of amateur spontaneous and enthusiastic propaganda—something quite different from professional lobbying, bought and paid for. These measures illustrate the power of professional lobbying. All of them have won an extraordinary amount of popular support, yet they have been not only stubbornly opposed but their consideration constantly delayed by efficient, professional lobbying, most of it outside of Washington.

Party obligations form another more dangerous variety of lobbying. In preelection times, when each party begins to formulate its platform and to carry on a campaign, contributions come in. Most of the contributions are small and cheerfully given without any promise or hope of specific return. Then the big contributors come along. They make it their business at the time of contributing to meet not only the local solicitor for funds but the "prominent men" of the party. Nothing, of course, is said at the time, but later when legislation is pending that affects the large contributor the political acquaintance is renewed, the subject discussed, obligations recalled, and desired results obtained. This kind of lobbying will also not be affected by legislation. Under present conditions in both major parties, political bosses who now assume the more dignified titles of State Chairmen or National Committeemen select the seemingly unimportant County Committeemen or State Committeemen who in turn select them. Hence there is no real accounting or responsibility to the party membership. When the members of both parties realize their power and reverse the procedure, taking an active part in party matters, serving as County Committeemen or selecting their own committeemen who in turn will select State Chairmen and National Committeemen, a sense of responsibility will be created which, in large measure, will do away with the tremendous power now exercised by these self-appointed leaders in both parties.

After all is said and done, and after the lobbying bill is passed, it will still remain a matter of the individual Representative in the House or Senate keeping faith with his constituents and exercising independence regardless of what political wrath may be visited upon him at the next election. The honest legislator who votes according to his best judgment and conscience will never fear or be tempted by the most skilful lobbyist that ever infested Washington; the other kind of legislator will not be improved by the passage of a law.

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