

Politics — Democratic and Republican:
Interview with the Spokane *Spokesman-Review*
(July 3, 1902)

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Mr. Debs talked entertainingly in an interview last night [July 3, 1902]. He has an infinite charm of manner, and is essentially an enthusiast on the subject of socialism. He was asked for his views relative to the pending contest in the Democratic Party between Grover Cleveland and William J. Bryan and its probable outcome. In reply, Mr. Debs said:

In my judgment the Democratic Party is on the even of the greatest crisis in its history. The progressive or radical element is engaged in a bitter contest to maintain its supremacy against the Bourbon element. The Clevelands, the Gormans,¹ and the Hills² are laying their wires to recapture the organization, and Mr. Bryan is stubbornly resisting their efforts.

Mr. Bryan's interviews and public declarations lead one to believe that he is not personally a candidate for President, and that he does not desire the nomination.³ Therein lies the greatest source of weakness to the element which he represents. Bryan's hold on the masses of his party is so strong that as a candidate he would be irresistible; with him out of the running the progressive Democrats are likely to be defeated because of their inability to concentrate upon any other man.⁴

The Bourbon element,⁵ represented by Mr. Cleveland, is acting either upon a tacit or actual understanding with the leaders of the Republican Party. They must know that they cannot win, even if they control the party. Times are as prosperous now as is possible under competitive conditions, and the Republicans will doubtless win the next election. A country's political condition is invariably determined by its economic and industrial conditions.

Mr. Bryan would be the greatest man in America were he to take a bold stand for socialism. he says he does not believe in socialism, but in free competition, a thing that is absolutely impossible where the machinery — the tools of labor — are in control of a few. Sooner or later, Mr. Bryan and the progressive element which follows him are bound to realize

that the free competition which was possible in Jefferson's day is impossible now, by reason of a thousand and one conditions. Mr. Jefferson was the exponent of pure democracy in his day; but the democracy he taught is inapplicable to present conditions of industrial life.

Should the Bourbon faction control the next Democratic National Convention, the radical element of democracy, represented by Bryan, will slough off, and a very large proportion will find the way into the Socialist Party. What Mr. Bryan himself might do remains to be seen. My estimate of the man is that he is thoroughly honest, and that he will follow his convictions wherever they may lead him.

Personally, I hope that the Bourbon element controls. If it does, the issues of the next campaign will be presented in a fairly accurate light; not altogether so, perhaps, but still much better than if the Bryan element should win again.

Poor Opinion of Roosevelt.

Mr. Debs was asked for his opinion of President Roosevelt's fight upon the trusts and said:

Before I take up Mr. Roosevelt's personality, permit me to say that I believe, with all socialists, that the trusts are essentially a product of industrial evolution. Combination has been forced by the exactions of the competitive system. It is as impossible to check its full development and fruition as to command the world to stand still. The socialists contend that the trusts should be operated for the benefit of all, not for the benefit of a favored few.

I regard Mr. Roosevelt's alleged antipathy to the trusts as a play to the galleries — a play dictated by party expediency and to satisfy public sentiment. Mr. Roosevelt's party is in power by virtue of trust support, and if he is reelected, which is his consuming ambition, it will be as a result of the same support. I do not anticipate any results from his fight on the trusts, partly because I believe him altogether insincere and partly because I believe any attempt to curb the growing power of combinations to be abortive.

In other ways I dislike Mr. Roosevelt. The man is thoroughly imbued with the spirit of militarism. Under other conditions he would be a despot.

In some ways I think he has shown himself devoid of the finer feelings of life. He is essentially arbitrary — almost tyrannical — by nature.

Another thought is pertinent to the trust fight of the administration. Mr. Knox, the Attorney General, is the man who did the legal work in the creation of the steel trust.⁶ Is it natural that one of the creators of the trust system should now act as its destroyer?

Asked for his views on the railway “merger,” Mr. Debs said:

The same answer can be given to that question as to the trust question. [Combination] cannot be headed off. In one form or another railway monopoly is sure to prevail. Moreover, it will extend until eventually all the railway systems will be combined under one management. You cannot prevent railway magnates from going into co-partnership any more than you can prevent private individuals and small businessmen from doing so. The remedy for railway monopoly is for all the people to own the railroads.

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¹ Arthur P. Gorman (1839-1906) was a US Senator from Maryland. Defeated in an 1898 reelection bid, he was returned to office by the Maryland legislature in 1902. Gorman was a white supremacist who worked to disfranchise black voters, who tended to vote Republican, and was a supporter of the Republican policy of high tariffs.

² David B. Hill (1843-1910) was a former Governor and US Senator from New York. A corporate attorney, Hill was loathed by progressive Democrats, although he was not directly associated with the corruption of Tammany Hall.

³ Although he ran for President of the United States in 1896, when he was supported by Debs, and 1900, Bryan did not in fact run for the office in 1904. He would make his third and final run for the Presidency in 1908.

⁴ Democrats nominated a David Hill protege, Alton Parker, in 1904, going to crushing defeat in November. The progressive wing of the party had attempted to nominate William Randolph Hearst, but failed to win sufficient support from Bryan to defeat the establishment nominee.

⁵ *The conservative element.*

⁶ Philander C. Knox (1853-1921) was an attorney for Carnegie Steel Corporation and sat with Andrew Mellon and Henry C. Frick on the board of the Pittsburgh National Bank of Commerce.