Farm Vote Shows Breaking of Old Party Lines

West, Having Tasted Power, Will Hold It, Says Political Observer—Next President from West of Missouri River

The writer of this article was selected by the Democratic National Committee to take charge of the important division of agricultural publicity during the recent campaign. There is probably no person better qualified to speak concerning political conditions in the West, which were the deciding factor in the Presidential contest.

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By Frank G. Odell.

POLITICAL post-mortems are useless except as they may serve to indicate constructive policies for the future. The outstanding fact in the recent Presidential election is the potency of the West in national affairs. By the term "the West" is included that territory lying between the Missouri River and the Pacific Ocean. Everyone now recognizes that the West decided the election. How to hold this newly acquired political allegiance now becomes the chief problem of the Democratic Party. The West has passed the partisan stage.

The case of Kansas reveals a political miracle. Republican as Pennsylvania since its admission to the Union, with possibly one exception, Kansas makes all politicians sit up and take notice. Governor Arthur Capper was re-elected as a Republican by a majority estimated at 130,000. Then those incomprehensible Jayhawkers walk right over the party line and give a 55,000 majority for Wilson. This is even more remarkable than the result in California.

North Dakota is another evidence of similar conditions, though in a lesser degree. Here some 40,000 farmers, affiliated with the American Society of Equity, formed a non-partisan political organization and captured the Republican primary, nominating their candidate for Governor and electing him in November. This same movement gave Wilson his majority in North Dakota.

There is a real dose of whining. In this State Senator Miles Poinsette comes back on the Republican ticket by a 55,000 majority and the State goes for Wilson by some 7,000.

All of this means more than the mere settlement of one Presidential contest. It means chiefly that the West has in one election become the real dominant force in national politics, and that if it retains its political balance it will probably continue to harvest a large and profitable crop of ice in future campaigns.

Old political traditions have been shattered. New York, Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Illinois are no longer pivotal States if present conditions become permanent. Trust the West to see to it that these conditions do become permanent.

The Farmers' Alliance movement of the eighties and its political progeny, the Populist Party, are but historic memories. The Missouri of our day is no longer the Missouri of the '70s. But where the former was the result of the needs of the times, it is to this day a problem for industry and labor. The problem of the time is the universal one of the agrarian revolution in the eighties, and the new political organization of the farmers is a part of the great constructive policy.

Witness the establishment of public service commissions in every State; the abolition of the free railway pass; the universal adoption of the coal royalty. All of these and other concessions were made to protect farmers' organizations in the fundamental right to trade collectively in their products, &c. The legislation shows a new order of minds in the State and of the nation as a whole bear ample testimony to the long-continued influence of the agrarian agitation of the eighties and nineties.

This developed incidentally a habit of political free thinking which has its reflex in the present generation of Western farmers. This has never been so apparent or so potential as on Nov. 7, 1916.

It is idle to say that this or that political family quarrel was the determining factor in this election. The farmers, then, have a right to expect that Wilson and his Administration will do for them what they want to do. A proper conception of this fact is essential to the understanding of coming political conditions.

The farmers have a right to be relied on as the natural balance of power to resist the inroads of radicalism. This may seem odd in view of his recent political actions, but it is nevertheless true. There is no more of the old deadend and his slow but constructive mental processes he has made more permanent and beneficial impression on the economic and political structure of this generation than any other class in American life.

Out in the West a new economic movement is in the making. The rapid settlement of the trans-Missouri country and its transcontinental importance in the breadbasket of the world, of the over-stimulated land values and given rise to a rapidly increasing tenant-crop on the farms.

This is bringing about another agrarian revolution in the West, and farmers are organizing in all the Western and Southwestern States for co-operative buying and selling, for protection of their market and incidentally and inevitably for enactment of political action as they may deem necessary. In this connection the case of North Dakota is quite in point.

There are in the State of Minnesota alone something over 700 of these farmers' co-operative societies. They are all prosperous and earning dividends on their capitalization, besides securing better prices for their members. In the grain belt, comprising ten States, there are several thousand such organizations with a membership running into the millions. They now practically control the local country market through their organization and are reaching out to establish themselves at the terminal centres. The politics of Minnesota, the Dakotas and the great Northwest, clear out to the coast, is in a state of seething turmoil because of this new condition.

While this is distinctly a renaissance of the agrarian revolution of the eighties, involving somewhat of radicalism, it nevertheless comprises in its membership the bulk of the real conservatives of the West—those who are bound to the soil by the tie of present or hoped-for ownership of the land. The biggest economic problem today in the life of the West is the question of how people on the land to stay and to make their labor contented and profitable.

This problem of the West is not a political but a business problem. The rapid growth of the farmer's co-operative movement necessarily involves friction with established business interests. The local merchant, the jobber, and the manufacturer must adjust their business relations to the new condition. It is for them to find how it is to come to stay. The farmer has begun to find himself in a business way. The co-operative movement is an established economic entity.

All of this implies the need of a better acquaintance and understanding between the farmer and the business man. Particularly is this true in the national sense. The West has discovered that it can do without the political help of the East. It will continue to assert its political independence, for whatever its faults, subervience and mead are not to be charged against the Westerners. If he should seem a bit cocky over the recent election, please reflect that his self-assurance is not without good reason.

No sounder advice could be given to East, and especially to the manufacturers of cultivating better acquaintance and understanding with a mutually profitable viewpoint of the new economic relation which is inevitably coming. Organized business has the money with which to aid the important job. Will it exhibit the common sense required to carry out so obviously sensible a program?

The political activities of 1918 and 1920 must necessarily take into account the newly found political independence of the West. The Democratic Party has no mortgage on the Westerners who supported President Wilson this year. Should his policies continue as generally unsatisfactory to the West as they have been during the last four years, and should the Democratic Party develop a consistent program of legislation for the interests of social justice, it may well hope to retain the allegiance of the West.

The preliminaries of this political battle will be fought out in the Congressional elections of 1918. The Republican organization of the West is shot full of holes. It may find itself in the next two years, but it will have to do more than make promises. The Western farmer has no more interest in the old tariff controversy than he has in Egyptology. He now controls his home market pretty completely, and he hopes to put the fear of God in the hearts of the politicians so successfully as presently to stop a lot of the gambling and juggling of the terminal markets which boosts the cost of living, for which he is made the goat in the public mind.

The writer is not inclined to indulge in prophecy, but the signs of the times seem to indicate that the time has come into national politics to stay. It may well be possible that the next President may come from the State of Missouri River, and that the East has lost its power of political control for a generation.