

# Has the Power of Public Opinion Waned?

Job E. Hedges Says It Has Ceased to be a Great Aggressive Force in America Since the Direct Primary Idea Became Popular

**I**NEFFICIENCY in organization for the conduct of the war is primarily due to inefficiency in the expression of public opinion, according to Job E. Hedges, lawyer and one-time Republican candidate for Governor of New York. In all previous wars, he points out, public opinion was active, aggressive—a force felt every day. Its great voice was heard helpfully, decisively, when crises arose. Why does not public opinion speak out now, in the commanding tones of former national emergencies? Because, says Mr. Hedges, it has no voice to speak with—a surgical operation, known as direct primary legislation, has silenced the organ of expression which, through the development of the political convention, had grown with the nation's growth for a century and over. It required a war, with its need of increased momentum in Governmental affairs by reaction from organized public opinion, loyal but outspoken, to lay bare the bad effects springing from the direct primary idea.

This view is the wartime indictment of the direct primary system by its opponents, and it foreshadows a nation-wide attack on primary laws in an effort to obtain the restoration of the convention system. An attempt will be made this Winter to bring about the repeal of the New York primary law by the Legislature. One of the leaders in this fight will be Mr. Hedges.

"The situation we find at Washington now," said he, "largely results from the lack of a strong, virile, critical, watchful,

affirmative opposition party in Congress. The minority party has strong individuals in it, but the great essential is lacking. That lack is due to the decadence of party government, and this has been caused by a fictitious substitute, the direct primary. Party government, conducted in the best spirit, is as essential to good government, State or national, as is the mechanism of an engine to its proper functioning. Through indifference, neglect, and default party government loses its virility and force as does any other form of human endeavor, but this does not detract from its real merit.

"Public opinion is best made affirmative through party organization, platforms, and campaigns, where the ideas of opposing parties are brought into competition, in seeking the approval of the electorate. This method states the issues ideally. But parties have been largely destroyed, in the former mean-



Photo by Brown Bros.

Job E. Hedges.

ing of the word, and the creation of public opinion, other than covering the smallest section of the territory needing covering, rendered ineffective by the direct primary.

"The theory of the direct primary is that every voter is prepared, willing, and able to express himself affirmatively or negatively on every public question. This would be a fact were it so, as the Irishman would say. The theory assumes that this state of mind can be brought about without conference, without exchanging views, without loca-

tion of responsibility—spontaneously. It disregards entirely the character of the Government itself, that it is representative in form and operation. It interjects at once the element of increased expense, precludes the desirable and justifiable ambition of the poor but capable seeker for office, emphasizes the opportunity of the man of means able to purchase publicity, and

places in office men who logically can say they are indebted to no one for office, to nothing but their own endeavors.

"The direct primary increases rather than diminishes the influence of the so-called political boss, who, with his extended acquaintance, is able to pass the word along and say who is regular or irregular. Under the direct primary system the boss can launch individual candidacies, with or without understanding with the candidate, which launching assumes the preparation beforehand of a 'popular demand'—that is, a fictitiously created demand.

"Further, there is placed on the nominee of the direct primary no declaration of principles representative of the party for which he is supposed to stand or of the electorate from which he finally receives his commission. For the public in general and the taxpayers directly it doubles and trebles the expense of the Government and leaves nobody to whom the individual citizen may appeal to voice in official life his opinions, except a man who has brought about his nomination by publicity created fictitiously by financial means in his own behalf or a man who is under obligations to other individuals whose wide acquaintance enabled them, for the purposes of personal advantage in some form, to bestow the nomination on him.

"The direct primary increases at a dangerous rate the influence of the office holder who seeks those alliances

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covered by the word patronage; alliances which under the party system have elements of evil, it is true, but exist there under circumstances where responsibility can be placed. Under the direct primaries there is no logical, official, or competent method or means for declaring the political principles sought to be crystallized in law or exemplified in administration; no method except by the candidate himself or the group representing his candidacy. While many questions are local, for cities, counties, and States, the most important modern-day problems are those affecting the nation. True, we have the national party conventions at this moment. It is not, however, the fact of their existence, but the theory and manner under which their membership is selected, that is the test of their usefulness.

"With the increase in our population, the average citizen is necessarily unable to have before him all the facts from which to draw his conclusions and express himself affirmatively or negatively at the polls. This necessarily compels the citizen to act through a representative of his selection with similar beliefs. Here the direct primaries have demonstrated their inefficiency. They have militated against the formation of public sentiment and at the same time increased the power of money. They have created a hypocritical condition of public mind in pretending to accomplish a good which they do not accomplish. They have failed to supply the machinery for good efficient Government.

"Comment, criticism, and expression of opinion through party action are as

necessary to the proper conduct of affairs as food is to the body. Otherwise inefficiency, incompetency, and failure at particular times will be considered to have public approval. There is vital need in Washington at this time of a majority party reflecting the best thought of its constituency. There is an equal need, as I said in the beginning, of an opposition party, coherent, tolerant, aggressive in intelligent criticism and in the projection of ideas of advantage to the country at large. Neither need will be supplied until members of Congress, members of Legislatures, and public executives are chosen through the representative form of party government, after consultation and reflection and imposing necessary responsibility for words and deeds on those elected to office.

"The quickest way to effect this is to cast out at once the chicanery, hypocrisy, with its stimulus to excessive individual ambitions and its irresponsibility, fathered and made possible under the form of government built on the direct primaries. I do not think there is any enthusiasm for the direct primary in any State where it has been applied, and nearly every State has adopted in some form or another the fashion originally set for the direct primary, introduced, it will be remembered, as a quickly acting panacea for all political ills.

"A movement every day acquiring increased momentum is under way among thoughtful men of all parties throughout the United States to return to normal American methods of party government. In New York, for instance, I believe the majority of thinking men desire to return to the convention system. The majority of newspapers in the State, I think, also

favor the repeal of the direct primary law.

"The illogical and evil effect of the primary law is shown in the discussion so far indulged in, preceding the attempt to have the measure repealed by the present Legislature. The problem is being argued not on its merits as to what is best for the State, but as to how the repeal of the direct primary law will affect this or that candidate. This discloses at once a weakness of the direct primary, namely, the substitution of personalities for problems of Government, the question of ambition preceding in importance the question of what should be most reflective of the opinion and desires of the State or nation.

"Ambition to serve the public is desirable and necessary, but the intrusting of official position to individual ambition, without direction as to the limits in which that ambition is to operate, is destructive.

"The final question is whether authority in executive and administrative office shall exemplify right and consistent thinking on the part of a constituency acting within the limits of our fundamental laws or whether government shall be the result of individual opinion of office holders selected after wild personal scrambles.

"At present the 100,000,000 people in the country are, practically speaking, under direct primary laws and therefore without means of presenting their corporate opinion. The result has been the disintegration of public opinion as we formerly knew it. Instead of forming and expressing itself through party association as before, it is now largely a matter of a vast number of individuals. Opinion, in order to be vital, must have

provided for it an effective form of expression. It must feel its voice heard, and to real purpose, or else the tendency is for it to grow weaker and weaker. It is this means of expression, an organ developed through a long period of years, that the direct primary has taken away from us. The war is now making this fact—which was apparent to the observing before—apparent to all. It is very noticeable in the country at large. Our failures to obtain the desired efficiency in the prosecution of war—all our troubles, in fact—have resulted in a measure from enfeebling the expression of vigorous public opinion through the direct primary.

"Executive and administrative government is intrusted to individuals who have pulled themselves out of the ruck by personal exploitations, without any declared purpose to regulate their conduct. The American people care not who does the people's work, but that it is done. It is strong language to say that the present conditions at Washington are due in large degree to the disintegrating effect of the direct primary, which has substituted a guess for a principle, but I do not think the language is too strong.

"In a convention, or through the convention system, neither of which is perfect any more than human nature is perfect, the people have the best opportunity for making opinion, establishing responsibility, and rewarding or punishing their representatives, according as they have carried out the mission for which they were elected. I think the pressing fundamental need of the country at this time is the repeal of the direct primary laws and the restoration of the convention system."