
Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”
The Master Speech Files, 1898, 1910-1945

Series 1: Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Political Ascension

File No. 310

1929 March 1

**New York City, NY -
Consumers' League Luncheon**

At Luncheon of Consumers League of New York City,
March 1, 1929

*The Governor Objects to Defeat of Important Legislative Bills without Open
Debate and Public Roll Call*

I am very glad indeed to have this opportunity to address the members of the Consumers League of New York and indirectly, through the radio, thousands of other voters of both parties in this State. It is particularly gratifying to be able to lay certain things before you at this critical period in the legislative session, for of all the many worthy activities of your organization, your unselfish, untiring and undiscouraged efforts to secure for labor the legislation needed to advance the welfare of the toilers and to protect them from injustice has attracted my interest and approval.

In my inaugural address, in which I tried to make clear to the people of the State my beliefs on certain fundamental matters of government, I expressed my conviction of our duty to acknowledge our indebtedness to those who create the necessities and comforts which mean so much in our lives. In my message to the Legislature I outlined a very definite and specific program which needed immediate attention. There was nothing particularly new in these suggestions. All of them had been demanded by your organization and by many other organizations of like character, as well as by thousands of other citizens interested in justice and fair play. They have, in the main, been made specifically or by unmistakable inference part of the political platform of both parties. They cannot possibly be dismissed as being partisan proposals or legislation suggested for political advantage. And yet, year after year, after the election is over, some hidden power behind the legislative majority has succeeded in preventing, in the great majority of instances, not only their enactment into laws, but even an open and honest discussion of their merits by either branch of our Legislature.

There are three ways of defeating proposed legislation. One is the method followed in the early days of our Republic, and which most truly

conforms to the correct practice of a Democracy. This is consideration of each proposal in open session and serious debate, in an open-minded and non-partisan spirit and with a sincere desire to weigh its merits. If it is found inadvisable or unwise, it is then slain, after a fair and open battle, and the reasons for such action are open for all the voters to examine and judge for themselves. This is the way in which all bills of real importance which have been shown any considerable approval and support by the voters of the State should be treated.

The second method is by the lash of the party whip, the demand on the legislators by their party leaders that they divide according to their political affiliations and leave to the master minds of their organizations the responsibility as to whether such action is justified or not. In this procedure the bill, when brought up for discussion, is foredoomed to failure, and all debates thereon are of a purely perfunctory nature; nor can any argument or reasoning change the final vote. There is no possible justification for the adoption of this course on bills which are avowedly non-partisan in character. Certainly, it would be a breach of good faith so to treat legislation which both parties have endorsed in their political creeds.

Then, there is the third method of killing legislation by secret strangulation, known more politely as "killing a bill in committee." If it is a measure that commands considerable support or if it is a measure, the principle of which no party would dare openly oppose, it is given a mock hearing or no hearing at all. The committee which holds the power of life or death over the measure solemnly meets and behind closed doors and for reasons best known to themselves proceeds, by a vote of its majority, which is in all cases of the same party as the majority in the Legislature, to refuse to report the measure for open discussion and debate.

Theoretically, the victim has one chance for its life. A motion may be made to discharge the committee and put the bill upon the calendar. But the advantage of this method of disposing of things on which it would be awkward to let the voters know one's attitude has created an established custom that a motion to discharge a committee must be defeated by a party vote without regard to its merits. This is the most objectionable and least defensible method of defeating legislation of any importance that could well be conceived.

It is wise to refer bills to committees. It is wise that committees should seriously consider them and should have the power to refuse to report them for legislative action. Otherwise, hundreds and thousands of bills introduced each year, which should never have been introduced at all and which are obviously not worthy of consideration would clog the legislative calendar so that our sessions would never end, which Heaven forbid! But there can be no possible defense for a refusal to report non-partisan legislation, supported in principle by both parties, urged by reputable and wise bodies, such as yours, defended by people of the highest reputation and character in public hearings, to such methods. And yet, this is exactly the way in which this labor legislation has been treated year after year by the majority party in control of all legislation at Albany.

In spite of the fair promises before Election Day, in spite of the declarations of sympathy by individual candidates for election and also in spite of the real convictions of our legislators, these bills have been persistently refused a place on the legislative calendar or a chance to obtain a public roll call which would reveal exactly the extent to which each legislator makes his performances square with his professions.

I do not know what powerful hidden hands in the past have shot the bolts of the committee doors and refused to let these bills appear; nor is it vital that we should know for the moment who they are that sit in the seats of the mighty, afraid to give this legislation a fair chance for its life. The important thing is that exactly this same proceeding of past years is being undertaken at this session. Bills meeting practically all of the points which I mentioned in my message have been introduced, some of them by Democrats, some of them by Republicans, but none of importance have been reported.

Unless your organization and all similar organizations and unless the voters of this State, regardless of party, make clear to their representatives in the Legislature their desire to have these measures seriously considered, they will not be reported. I have done what lies in my power. I call on you and all who hear my voice to arouse themselves and do what lies in their power, and in their power alone. Make plain your determination that these measures be reported and debated and passed or rejected on their merits, after a full understanding of their provisions by the members of the Legislature and by the public as well. If they are faulty in construction, if they are wrong in principle, if they do not technically carry out their intent, then they deserve defeat.

In view of the widespread popular belief that they should be passed, in view of the care in which they have been drawn, in view of the hearings of several years past on practically identical measures, I for one am willing and glad to have these measures seriously and impartially discussed, standing assured that if they are honestly considered from a non-partisan standpoint, the great majority of them will be made a part of the laws of our State, and that this year will mark a long stride forward along the road to progress in wise and progressive labor legislation.

As I said, I have done what I can so far. I will continue to do what I can not only during this session, but afterwards. I call upon all who hear me to do all possible to prevent a recurrence of the unfair and un-American treatment this legislation has received in times gone by.