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Agriculture and Associated Subjects

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Unlike some people I know I shall continue today the record which I have made this summer of keeping away from all subjects of partisan politics. For two months I have spent the greater part of the time visiting different parts of the State of New York, and the fact that I have traveled nearly six thousand miles and visited almost every county proves that we have a real empire within our State. One of the most pleasant features of the trip has been the widespread appreciation throughout the rural counties, the approval which is given to the program of tax equalization and tax reduction recommended by the Governor's Agricultural Advisory Commission, and enacted into law by the last Legislature.

For a dozen years there has been much talk of helping the farmer—mostly talk. This year of grace, 1929, will go down into history as the first year in which actual relief was given. As I have been pointing out this tax relief can only become a part and parcel of your own tax bill, if your local officials, especially the supervisors who make up your county board pass the reduction on to the individual taxpayers and do not spend for other purposes, the money which the State has saved you. Next year this tax equalization legislation will, I hope, be further extended. This part of the program is in the nature of emergency relief, and the next step is for us to take up matters which are more fundamental and which will apply not only to the present but to the future of agriculture in this State.

The next important step is the state-wide survey which has been recommended by my advisory commission. We need to speed up the soil survey work now being conducted with extreme slowness by the federal government, for at the present rate of progress it will take another thirty years to cover all the counties of the State. We ought to cut that down to six or seven years. In other words in order to put farming as a whole on a more business-like basis, in order to attract new capital and new people to the third greatest industry of the State. In order to plan for more intelligent marketing we must first find out what crops will pay us best to raise and the acres in the State where each crop best fits in.

With this must go two important improvements, first the encouragement of forestry on those lands which are best suited to the growing of trees, and secondly, a definite effort to keep our own metropolitan markets for New York State grown produce. I refer especially to the more intelligent marketing of vegetables and fruits.

The establishment of the "New York Milk Shed" by the intelligent cooperation of the Dairymen's League and other cooperative organizations, with the city authorities, points the way.

In other words, this State is taking the lead in applying business methods and common sense to the problem of taxes and the problems of production and marketing.

There is one other broad economic division which relates to the agricultural prosperity of the State in which it is time for our citizens to take an interest. We all know the meaning of home economics and also we know that the school of home economics and the agricultural schools throughout the State are accomplishing great things in raising the standard of living on the farm.

That is not enough. In the home life of every family in this State engaged in the pursuit of agriculture just as in the home life of the dwellers in the cities of the State, important elements, known as public utilities take a very definite place. I need mention but two of them, the telephone and the electric current in the home. It is an interesting fact that, while telephones and electricity are broadly classed as public utilities in the same field with railroads, a different yard stick is applied to their regulation. If you buy a ticket on a railroad in this State it makes no difference whether you are traveling on the main line of the New York Central where the traffic is heavy or on a small single track road in a sparsely settled section of the State. Your railroad costs the same per mile in both cases.

This is on the theory that, even though there may be little or no profit to the railroad in running passenger trains on a branch line, it should be made up for by the profit on the heavily-traveled section of the road, and that a citizen should not be discriminated against just because he happens to live on a branch line instead of a main line.

The underlying theory covering all public utilities is that they receive the privilege of the special franchise from the people of the State themselves, and that for this privilege they must give the best possible service equally to all citizens of the State. That undoubtedly was the underlying thought in the earliest days in which franchises were granted by the State.

In the case of railroads that theory is still recognized and lived up to. For example, a railroad is not allowed today to abandon a small branch line just because that line is not profitable unless, and until the public authorities are convinced that the inhabitants of that part of the State can obtain at least an equally good method of transportation by some other means such as bus lines.

Now, I am sorry to say that the principle of reasonably equal service at reasonably equal cost to all the people of the State has not been carried out with regard to the two latest forms of public service, the telephone and electricity.

For some reason (the history of which it is unnecessary to go into) the original telephone companies were allowed to charge different kinds of rates, and now, when practically all telephones are controlled by the greatest of all American mergers, we do not insist on either uniform service or uniform rates.

It is, of course, well known that the cost of the telephone to the farmer, for example, depends very largely on what county and even more on what particular road he happens to live. If he happens to be born on a farm on a highway away from neighbors he has to shoulder practically the entire original cost and upkeep cost of his telephone line; whereas, if he happens to live close to many neighbors the cost of the very essential telephone is enormously reduced both for installation and for service charges. By the same token, the service given by the telephone company is as a matter of public knowledge vastly better in some localities than in others. In other words the practical use of the great utility known as the telephone is dependent in cost and usefulness in too many cases on the place where a man's house happens to be located.

The other example and one which is even more glaring in its unfairness is that of the use of electricity in the homes. The railroad principles of fairly uniform rates has been thrown to the winds even by the public regulating body known as the Public Service Commission. Is it not time to stop and ask the question, "Why does electricity in the home, the electric lights, electric refrigerator, electric sewing machine, the home machinery cost as high as from 15 to 20 cents per kilowatt-hour in some localities and as low as from 4 to 6 cents per kilowatt-hour in other localities?"

Why should families in one section be so grossly penalized over families in other sections? This difference in charges is true not merely in its application to regions as large as counties, but is true in respect to towns adjoining each other and houses separated only by a mile or two. This is perhaps one reason why even today nearly two-thirds of all the farm houses in the State of New York have no electricity. I am wondering whether it is not time for the people of the State to ask for the application of a more uniform rate and a more uniform system of charging for installation.

Many of you doubtless know examples, as I do, of householders who would like to install electricity in their homes and on their farms, but who feel that the initial cost of the installation is made so high by the electric companies that they are totally unable to afford it.

During recent years the small local company furnishing electric light has been rapidly absorbed and merged into larger companies. There may have been some reason for the difference in rates in the earlier days when each company stood on its own earning power. Today however things are far different.

Very recently the greater part of all the electric companies in the State of New York were merged into three holding companies and within the past few months these three great holding companies have been merged into one colossal holding company. That holding company controls today over three-quarters of the entire area of the State of New York.

The first great question to ask is whether the savings which have been promised in management and in overhead by the merger will be translated into four practical results. First, better service; second, cheaper and more uniform installation costs; third, definitely and materially lower rates for the use of the electricity in the homes; and fourth, a complete reorganization and simplification of the most complicated and impossible series of contracts between the householder and the company which the legal profession has invented in all its history.

I am not going to touch on the legality of these mergers at this time, but I am asking the very definite question, "How long will it be before these material benefits to the householder in the State of New York will become accomplished facts?"

Those of you who live on the farm and those of you who live in the city, men, women and children, old and young, will anxiously await a definite reply to that question.

There is nothing of radicalism or of socialism in anything which I have said. In the year 1776 the sovereignty, over the land, the waters, and the air of the State of New York passed from King George the 3rd to the people of the State of New York.

In all our history since July 4, 1776, the people of the State of New York have continued, at least in theory, to exercise that sovereignty. They have granted franchises for the use of the land for purposes of transportation. They have granted the use of the land for the purpose of erecting wires for better communication and other wires for transmitting power, but in every case they have granted these franchises on certain conditions. There still remain many great possessions for which franchises have not yet been granted. Many of the flowing waters of the State still belong to the sovereignty of the people. If it is possible for these possessions in the flowing waters to be given away in virtual perpetuity, perhaps the day will come when the only remaining possession, the free air which we breathe may likewise pass from our control. Regardless of party, regardless of sex, regardless of age, it is our duty to take stock and to seek relief from any conditions which today may be unfair to the average citizen. We need an awakening of the public conscience not for our own sakes alone, but for the prosperity and happiness of the lives of our children.

May this great gathering from every part of the State realize to the full the responsibility which rests on this generation.