
Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”

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Albany, NY - Radio Address re Water Power

RADIO SPEECH OF GOVERNOR ROOSEVELT

APRIL 7, 1931.

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I want to talk to you very briefly tonight about the influence of public opinion on great questions of State policy, and I will use as an illustration an episode that has occurred in Albany during the past ten days.

Since last Thursday when I decided to make a frank appeal to the people of our State to help me save the St. Lawrence Water Power project, the crisis itself seems to have been averted. This afternoon I am happy to say that the State Senate has refused to pass the restrictive amendment proposed by Senator Knight, and there now seems no good reason why the Power Authority bill should not become law within a very short time. I feel very strongly that this result is due in

large part to the wave of protest which swept over the State from north to south and from east to west immediately following the announcement by the Republican Senate leaders last Thursday that they had amended the power bill in a way which they knew definitely would of necessity compel its veto by the Governor. The great majority of the newspapers of the State, regardless of party, understood not only that the attempt to deprive the Governor of the power of appointing the Trustees for the St. Lawrence Development was merely another of a long series of political tricks, but also that it was contrary to the law passed last year, contrary to the recommendation of the Investigating Commission and contrary to the bill as it passed the Assembly a week ago. Will you let me for a few minutes describe very briefly the existing situation in regard to the St. Lawrence Power Development.

You are all familiar with the fact that over twenty years ago the Legislature literally gave away for nothing to the Aluminum Company of America the title of the State in the bed and waters of the St. Lawrence River; that this action was rescinded and annulled by a subsequent legislature on the ground that the Aluminum Company had done nothing to use their special franchise. At about that time, twenty years ago, a growing body of public opinion began to oppose any private development of a tremendously valuable property right owned by the people of the State. In the early years of Governor Smith's term a desperate effort was made by the power companies and the Aluminum Company to get the State to turn the St. Lawrence sites over to them on a so-called fifty year lease. Governor Smith made it perfectly clear at that time that a fifty year lease

was in practical effect an outright gift and that the State would never in all human probability get its own property back again. He tried in vain for many years to get the Legislature to approve of the development of the site through what is known as an Authority -- in other words a quasi public corporation created by the State to build a dam and a power house and with the right to finance the project by selling bonds, thus avoiding any direct cost to the taxpayers or the State Treasury.

During my first year in office I begged the Legislature for the same thing plus the policy of assuring cheaper power and electric light to consumers by having the State Authority sell the power under what is known as the contract method -- in other words a system of transmission and distribution

guaranteeing fair rates to the consumer; together with the further proviso that if no satisfactory contracts could be made with existing power companies, the State ought to evolve some other plan for transmission and distribution to the consumer.

Last year toward the close of the 1930 session the Republican leaders turned a complete somersault. Public opinion had made itself felt in no uncertain terms and the real reason for the somersault was the fear on

the part of the Republican leaders that they would be placed at a very definite disadvantage in the forthcoming Governorship campaign. They passed a bill giving me the authority to name an Investigating Commission to study the whole project and that commission made its favorable report in February of this year.

That report proved the engineering feasibility of the project at a cost much below the estimate and recommended in favor of creating the Power Authority for the purpose of building the dam and the power house; and further, to try to make contracts for the transmission and distribution of the power on the basis of the lowest possible rates to the consumer compatible with a fair return on the actual investment of the private distributing companies. No contract could go into effect until after public hearings and until after it had been approved by the Governor. Thus a double safeguard for the public was created.

The responsibility of the Governor was two-fold: First, as the head of the Executive Department, for the naming of the Power Trustees; and, secondly, his veto or approval of any proposed contracts.

In this form the Assembly a week ago passed the bill creating the Power Authority

and everything looked like smooth sailing until it was reported out by the Senate Committee with a surprising amendment taking the appointing power away from the Governor and naming five individuals as Trustees. The only reason for this amendment was the fact that they knew I would *have to* veto the ~~major~~ bill in its altered form; and they thus hoped to pigeonhole and obstruct this whole project for another year. Of course, it goes without saying that the question of the personality of the Trustees has not entered and does not enter into the discussion at all. I shall give no consideration to who should be Trustees until after the bill has been signed and becomes law. It is, of course, well to bear in mind the fact that the functions of the Power Trustees are very different from those of the Investigation Commission,

which studied the plans and reported during the past year.

With the passage of this bill and its signature by me, the State of New York enters into the definite first phase for the development of the Saint Lawrence through a governmental agency.

Three tasks will confront the new Trustees: First, to complete and perfect the engineering plans; secondly, to try to make contracts for transmission and distribution with existing or new private companies; third, to negotiate with the Federal Government and with the Canadian authorities. On this latter point, I can only say that I hope that there will be no political or administrative obstruction in Washington; and the State of New York must very properly make its plans so as to interfere in no possible way with the present or future navigation of the St. Lawrence river.

The State of New York has no desire selfishly to block either our Federal Government or the Canadian governments in any ^{navigation} development of the St. Lawrence which they may mutually agree on. There is therefore no real reason for obstruction in Washington.

The bill further distinctly provides that if the Power Trustees are unable to bring about a contract or contracts satisfactory to them and to the Governor, with private companies, for transmission and distribution, then the Trustees must report to the Legislature some other plan, if practicable, for either transmission or distribution, or both, which may involve the erection of transmission lines by the Authority itself. ² To my mind the other great keynote which is struck by the present bill is the solemn declaration of principle that the primary purpose of this St. Lawrence Development is not merely for big industrial

purposes but is essentially for the providing of cheaper electricity and better facilities for distribution of electricity to the householders and small users as broadly as possible through the state.

From the very beginning I have held to a consistent course and a consistent objective. I have fought all along for development of this power by an agency of the State itself and not by any private corporation. Furthermore, I have fought from the very beginning for the use and distribution of this power for the great purposes of bringing more and cheaper electricity into the homes of the state, into the small shops and small industries, into the farms and into the flats.

I am grateful for the fact that there has been such a splendid response from every corner of the State to this policy, for without that response it is clear that it would not have had a chance of going through the Legislature. The influence of a handful of political leaders is strong and so is the influence of private corporations when they see an opportunity to get something for nothing; but stronger than all of these put together is the influence of Mr. and Mrs. Average Voter. It may take a good many years to translate this influence of the people of the State into terms of law, but public opinion when it understands a policy and supports it is bound to win in the long run.

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Radio Address, Albany, April 7, 1931

Water Power

p. 718
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