

McClure's Magazine
June, 1900

Governor Roosevelt—As An Experiment

THEODORE ROOSEVELT'S career is a practical experiment in politics. He is aiming at success. If he were content to be good, he would not stand out as he does among the honest men who are known in political life, but who for the most part maintain their personal purity by holding aloof and exerting only so much influence as is possible by arousing or directing public opinion. Mr. Roosevelt always has recognized that he had not only to keep clean himself, but to get things done.

He hesitated once when he was an assemblyman. He became a leader in the House during his first term, and he put through several reform laws by forcing or persuading the party to take them up. In a subsequent term he was so influenced by his many Mugwump friends that he stood out alone, with a few followers to fight; just to fight. This lasted only a few weeks, however. He saw that he could accomplish nothing by personifying a universal protest; so in he went again to get things done, to put through all that it was possible to force upon his party, and his record in this legislature was a good one.

When he returned from Cuba, the old question arose in no very new form. Should he stand out with the comparatively few so-called independents and fight everything, or should he join with the machine and as governor do things? I told that story in the May, 1899, number of this magazine; and the decision to accept the regular Republican nomination and make his fight within the party was recounted there with some of the differences which were bound to come between such a man and an organization. The question raised then was, "Would Mr. Roosevelt succeed in doing the right thing always and carrying the organization with him?" The experiment was going on. It is still going on. The first term of his governorship is about over. What is the result? To tell what laws were passed would not signify, from my point of view; that is a matter of mere local interest. It is the success or failure of the man that is significant, because, not alone that he is honest and practical, but because people believe he is honest; and especially the politicians know this. The only man I ever heard question it was a notorious Tammany legislator; this is the way he put it:

"Say, do you know the governor's got the best lay I ever seen in politics? I don't see why nobody thought of it before. It's dead easy. He just plays the honesty game, and see how it works!"

Thus even he did not really doubt Mr. Roosevelt's honesty. He simply could not rise to a point where he could grasp the idea of sincerity. Life was a game, and honesty was a pretty good trick to play; that was all.

The two years at Albany have been a severe trial. There were no great pieces of legislation up to attract popular enthusiasm and help the governor carry his will over the machine's. Neither was there any important executive act to give his position the force of public

feeling. It was a commonplace term, and the fights were all quiet contests. All the better for the present purpose. They were within the organization, practical politics.

For there were fights. The governor and the organization clashed with dangerous frequency; and two or three times Mr. Roosevelt and the leaders looked red into one another's faces, lips tight and jaws set, separating as if for good and all. But each time the governor won, the party leaders submitted, and cooperation was resumed without any unpleasant recollections. Two of these disagreements, or "splits," as they were called, will do here to tell the whole story.

Louis F. Payn was superintendent of insurance when Mr. Roosevelt was elected. He was a Republican grown old in the party; a friend of Senator Platt, the state leader, from the days when the senator was a novice in politics; and he had been appointed by Governor Black, Mr. Roosevelt's Republican predecessor. Mr. Payn had been a lobbyist who did business on a grand scale, but his friends said for him (he never speaks for himself) that no matter what his past had been, his administration of the Department of Insurance was above reproach. He wanted to stay. His term in office expired on January 1, 1900, and he was glad the end came in the middle of Mr. Roosevelt's term, because he would like to have had the stamp of approval which an honest man could put upon the honest end of his life. The man with a past seemed to be really proud of his virtuous present.

The governor laughed in a merry way he has, and said that Mr. Payn would have to go. Mr. Payn declared he meant to stay. He didn't laugh, and the governor didn't laugh so much after that. It is known that Roosevelt is a fighter. So is Lou Payn. He is a surly, vindictive man who knows no limitations. There is a story that Senator Platt tried once to persuade Payn to "let up" on an enemy of theirs. Mr. Platt showed that it was good politics in this case to forgive; the enemy was a man of power in his district. "No, sir," said Payn, "I won't quit on that cuss while he stands above ground." The senator looked in the angry face, and saw that this was true. "That," he said, "is the reason you are the leader of only a small section of the country, Lou."

Payn fought at first very fairly. A flood of petitions from the insurance companies poured in asking the governor to retain the superintendent. They all endorsed his official conduct. This did no good. The governor began to ask men to take Payn's place. Payn saw the leaders. The leaders remonstrated with the governor, who answered simply that Payn had to go. The Senate would not confirm any successor, was the answer. Payn had the Tammany senators, and he had had personal relations with enough Republican senators to make them stand by him. Very well. The governor answered that he would name a man whom the Senate could not fail to confirm, an ex-senator or some good party man. This would have been hard on the Senate, but he was told to go ahead. He asked an ex-senator, and the Payn men hustled around for a day; they laughed in their sleeves. The ex-senator declined the nomination. The party was squarely with Payn, who felt safe enough, to say to the governor that, if he would renominate him, "old Lou Payn" would stand by the governor when, when—well, when Tom Platt had thrown Teddy Roosevelt over into the ditch.

The governor sounded the Senate. The Senate was sound for Payn. He spoke plainly to the leaders. They were plainly for Payn. It was a solid front the enemy was showing, but there was one weak place.

All right. The governor said that if the Senate wouldn't confirm a man in Payn's place, he would wait till the Senate adjourned; then he would bring charges against Payn, and put him on trial. What could he charge? What did he know—"know" meaning prove?

Well, for example—about that time two big Wall Street men were quarreling, and one of them in a huff got some information about a trust company his rival had a remote interest in. The

facts had been laid before the governor. Among the items was a very large loan to Lou Payn by a prominent corporation officer. It appeared that if charges were made against Lou Payn quite a large lot of miscellaneous trouble would be kicked up for many more beside the Superintendent of Insurance.

That was enough. The leaders asked for that list of names the governor had. He brought it out again, unchanged, and the first man on it was chosen, nominated, confirmed, installed. Mr. Payn said things privately about interminable war, but this fight was won.

The next was less personal and far more important. It brought the governor into conflict with the corporations, and only very wise men can foresee the end; some of them say it is the end of Roosevelt.

The governor has a notion that the way to deal with "capital" is to be fair. That was the way also to deal with "labor." That was the best policy with all the big things, as it was with the little things.

"If there should be disaster at the Croton Dam strike," he said one day, when that difficulty was beginning to disturb New York, "I'd order out the militia in a minute. But I'd sign an employer's liability law, too."

Half an hour later Major General Roe telegraphed for troops, and he got leave instantly to call out all he needed.

There is in the man contempt for the demagogic cry against capital, and there is in him also a fierce contempt for the dishonesty and grasping selfishness of capitalists. So with labor. He would shoot into a murderous mob with grim satisfaction, just as he stood up for fair play for strikers in New York when he was a police commissioner.

When he was elected governor, he said privately that no corporation should get a privilege without paying the state for it, and pretty soon he went on to the logical conclusion that all corporations should pay for the privileges they already had. They were not paying their share of the taxes. They paid on their buildings, real estate, cars, trackage, etc., but not for their franchises. Mr. Roosevelt broached the subject of a franchise tax. Objections were raised, but not much was said till the idea appeared in the first draft of the message to the legislature of 1899. Then the organization opposed it strenuously.

Most of the corporations contribute largely to the campaign funds of both political parties in New York. Republicans never offer any anti-capital legislation; the Democrats offer a great deal, and intend none. The Democratic position in the state is well understood. Most of the big Tammany men are interested heavily in the local corporations, and their private secretaries sometimes write the antitrust, anti-capital planks. This is all part of what our Tammany legislator above quoted would call "the game."

The Republican organization presented some good arguments against the franchise tax paragraph in the governor's message: the difficulty of finding honest, expert assessors; the lack of standards by which to determine the value of such intangible property; the danger in the future of hateful taxation which would be confiscation. The governor said these were all matters of skill. He meant to be only just, and he would consult with the corporations about drawing up the bill. But the leaders urged that there was no public demand for such a tax; and that the party had promised nothing of the kind in the platform. To these the governor replied that it would be all the wiser to legislate in these matters quietly, without arousing any popular excitement like that which had been turning the West upside down, and he thought that a piece of legislation against the abuses of corporations, put through decently in a "capitalist state" of New York's wealth by the Republican party, would be a good example to set to the "crank" states, which, like

Tammany, shouted mightily and did nothing, or wanted to hit “money” out of spite, envy, and ignorance.

The difference of opinion grew to a “split.” The period of reason was past, and the state of war was declared. For a while it looked as if all legislation and all appointments would be involved. But the organization chose another course. The governor might present his message if he would, but the legislature should not heed that part of it which advised a franchise tax law. The message was sent in, and the corporations began to move. They were told by Mr. Roosevelt that they might have a voice, if they wished, in the drawing of the bill. This invitation was public, and it was perfectly understood.

“Yes, I saw it in the paper,” said one corporation officer, “but I guess we won’t have to see the governor.”

They saw the organization. They had a man at Albany, the regular man, to watch the bill, and it was said that he had a quarter of a million dollars to beat it with. He saw it introduced, referred, “put to sleep.” He reported it dead, killed by the organization, so that he did not have to spend a cent.

“I haven’t drawn a contract on it,” he said, meaning that he had not even promised to pay anything to legislators to vote against it. “It’s a dead duck. I listened to the heart of it, and there wasn’t a flutter.”

The governor worried a little. He talked a great deal to legislators one by one, two by two. Pretty soon he was cheerful. He talked to the organization about it. Then he was angry. He saw the leaders of the party in the House and Senate. “Orders were orders,” they said, and they could do nothing.

One day, toward the end of the session, soon after the watchman in the lobby had given his expert opinion on the state of the bill, the governor, finding he could not get it out of committee otherwise, sent in a special message. The “steering committee” would have to report it out if that was read. The word flew about from man to man, the message was there at the Speaker’s desk; there, too, were the orders. What could be done? Somebody seemed to recall the exact phrasing of the orders.

This somebody tore the message up—an unprecedented piece of audacity; it was worse: it was a political mistake. The cool heads were shocked. Suppose the governor should appeal to public opinion with his torn message in his hand! The Speaker became ill, and went home for a day. The watchman out in the lobby was in a fine frenzy. Perhaps he was sorry then that he had no contracts drawn. He ran to telephone to New York; he flew back, and began sending page boys to legislators. The sweat rolled off his face and head.

The governor drew down his upper lip to bite at his mustache, as he does when he is in a rage. Then he saw, as the Assembly leaders had seen, and he laughed. He dictated another message, and had that delivered at the Speaker’s desk. The Speaker received it; it was read; it was heeded. The steering committee reported the bill, and both houses passed it; the sweating watchman with his contracts had come to the rescue too late.

This woke up the corporations, and they began to respond to the governor’s invitation to see him. They had suggestions to offer, amendments, but it was too late. The bill was before the governor, and the legislature had adjourned. It was a ridiculous situation. The usual hearing was given. Some of the corporations had their lawyers on hand to argue their side. Even this was not in vain. They did succeed in persuading the governor that the bill was imperfect, and should not be signed as it stood. Would he let it drop and have another bill introduced next year? No, he said, with some humor; he could not very well do that. Would he call an extra session? He would

consider that. He decided that it would be fair and worth while. Then he need not sign this bill? Well, he thought that, all things considered, he had better sign this bill, so that he would be sure of having something to show when all was over. Moreover, with a franchise law on the books, the amendments to be suggested would probably be more acceptable to him. The extra session was called, a few amendments were adopted, but these changes were so unsatisfactory to the corporations that they are going to fight the law in the highest courts.

What is the result? The organization doesn't like Mr. Roosevelt as governor, neither does "Lou" Payn, neither do the corporations. The corporations cannot come out openly to fight him; they have simply served notice on the organization that if he is renominated they will not contribute to campaign funds. But the organization cannot refuse to renominate him, for he has said openly that he wants to finish up his work: levy the franchise tax, see to the amendment, keep in a fair board of assessors, etc. And besides, he has marked the administration as his, so that for the party to fail to honor him again would be to repudiate its own work.

For the politicians the obvious solution of the problem would be to promote him to a place where there would be nothing for him to do but be good. The vice presidency is just the thing. But Mr. Roosevelt wants work, not a soft place; and he would refuse the nomination. But inasmuch as the organizations of all the states are equally interested in getting rid of such a man, the policy would be to work up a wave of popular enthusiasm which should roll up from the West and Southwest a nomination by acclamation in the convention of his party. This he could not refuse, and thus it might seem that the people had shelved the colonel of the Rough Riders in the most dignified and harmless position in the gift of his country. Then everybody could say, "We told you so," for both the theorists and the politicians have said that it is impossible in practical politics to be honest and successful too.