

Professor Leacock And Prohibition

The cutting from Montreal April 4, is well worthy of your production in the Guardian, Professor Leacock of McGill is a man of action and his speech enclosed...

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TORONTO, April 4.— Professor Stephen Leacock, of McGill University, Montreal, addressed a gathering under the auspices of the Liberty League here on Saturday night, in opposition to prohibition.

The noted author and satirist, denouncing the attitude of the prohibitionists, charged that "a fanatic minority has captured the ear of the public and the power of the legislature in the Province of Ontario, and have contrived to throw around them a false mantle of religion and morality."

Professor Leacock said, "Among the most treasured possessions of the British people is the heritage of free speech. I ask it now. I may tell you so, for there is but little left in regard to this matter of prohibition in the province of Ontario."

A farcical minority has captured the ear of the public and the power of the legislature. They have contrived to throw around them a false mantle of religion and morality. And for the time being the only response is silence.

"Things have come to a point where the expression of opinion is no longer free and unrestrained. People will not speak out frankly what they think. This man trembles for his business, that man for his profession. All, or nearly, all keep silent. The prohibitionist has contrived to masquerade before the country as if he were of necessity a good man, and his opponent of necessity a bad one."

"The truth is that a very large part of the most honest and honorable opinion of the country is opposed to prohibition; and a very large part of the worst opinion, and the meanest elements in the community are strongly in favor of it."

"I happen to be one of those who are honestly and sincerely opposed to prohibition as a matter of principle. I think the movement is the worst national development, the most un-British agitation that has come to us in half a century. It is my candid belief that the adoption of prohibition in the United States was the worst disaster that has fallen upon the American republic since its organization. If it could last, it would undermine the foundations of government itself. If it could last, it would in time bring down the strongest political fabric into anarchy and dissolution."

"But prohibition cannot last, neither here nor there, nor anywhere because it is based upon a lie. And a lie cannot endure. Prohibition declares it to be a crime to drink beer. And it is not a crime. The common-sense of every honest man tells him that it is not a crime to drink a glass of beer. All the legislatures that ever sat cannot make it so. You can make your statutes as cruel and as sharp as you like. You may multiply your spies and informers, you may throw wide the doors of your penitentiaries, and you still cannot make it a crime, and the sharper and the harder your law the more public opinion and public feeling will revolt against it."

FREEDOM AGAINST BONDAGE. Let those who have organized the legislative tyranny for prohibition look well to what is bound to follow. They are putting their trust in coercion, in the jail, in the whip and the scourge. They are done

with the moral appeal. They are finished with persuasion. They want however, authority. They want to say, 'Thou Shalt, and Thou Shalt Not, and when they say it to be obeyed under the fear of the criminal law. And the time must come when they and their law must go down together. I tell you that if there is a moral issue involved in this present contest it is the issue of the spirit of human freedom struggling against bondage. The age-long spirit of liberty that the chain can never bind, that the gas can never silence, and that, even the fires of Smithfield could but illuminate to a brighter radiance. "I lay stress on this aspect of liberty—shall I say of British liberty, because that is what is at stake. The prohibitionist tries here to mislead you. He wants to form you into thinking that it is an administrative question, or a political question of the right of the majority to rule. It is none of these things. The prohibitionist, I say, would try to deceive you into thinking that the question at issue is a medical question, that it turns upon the goodness or badness of beer from a purely digestive standpoint. It is not so. Beer may be good or may be bad. My own candid opinion reached after fifty-one years of reflection, is that there is nothing like it. But even if I knew it were as bad as the excessive use of tea or coffee I still would strongly oppose a criminal law to prohibit its consumption. "But the plain truth is that beer is just an ordinary beverage. You can not make it criminal, if you try. The attempt is silly. Common sense revolts at it. Some people find that it agrees with them, and others do not. It belongs, in the same class with cucumbers. And the attempt to make consumption of beer criminal is as silly and as futile as if you passed a law to send a man to jail for eating cucumber salad."

"You can never shackle upon England the chain of prohibition because it is a chain that will not fit, a shackle that will be snapped asunder the moment that you try to rivet it. "The more the pity that we are so soon unmindful of our heritage. We are wandering into untrodden paths, despairing of being good by virtue of the individual spirit, we are to be made good by statute. Every hysterical voice of the majority is to be clamped upon us as a code of conduct. Our life, our food, our clothes, our amusements are to be made the subject of stringent and coercive legislation. And for those who will not obey there waits the jail. "At an easy computation there are at least two million of us in Canada who want, if left alone, to drink beer and wine. The prohibitionist proposes to treat us as two million criminals. It can't be done. All that he can effect is to break down the basis of law itself. "And that is what is happening in America. Law, divorced from the support of the individual conscience, is breaking down. A vast wave of crime is sweeping over the continent. And the reason is not far to seek. Prohibition is the most fruitful mother of crime that ever spawned its progeny upon the world. "Note well what has happened. Before the prohibitionist, had their way and before hysteria, fanaticism and mistaken desire for righteousness placed them in power, there was no more frequent argument, no greater mainstay, of their cause than the plea that

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under the moment that you try to rivet it. "The more the pity that we are so soon unmindful of our heritage. We are wandering into untrodden paths, despairing of being good by virtue of the individual spirit, we are to be made good by statute. Every hysterical voice of the majority is to be clamped upon us as a code of conduct. Our life, our food, our clothes, our amusements are to be made the subject of stringent and coercive legislation. And for those who will not obey there waits the jail. "At an easy computation there are at least two million of us in Canada who want, if left alone, to drink beer and wine. The prohibitionist proposes to treat us as two million criminals. It can't be done. All that he can effect is to break down the basis of law itself. "And that is what is happening in America. Law, divorced from the support of the individual conscience, is breaking down. A vast wave of crime is sweeping over the continent. And the reason is not far to seek. Prohibition is the most fruitful mother of crime that ever spawned its progeny upon the world. "Note well what has happened. Before the prohibitionist, had their way and before hysteria, fanaticism and mistaken desire for righteousness placed them in power, there was no more frequent argument, no greater mainstay, of their cause than the plea that

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broken by many of the most respected people of the community. They know that I can only be maintained at all by the most brutal, most stringent and most repulsive of methods. They see employed in its service the vices, of human creatures, the paid informer—the man that lacks even the honor that prevails among thieves—the man who carries down through ages the part of Judas Iscariot. This they see and upon this they act. The law has become something to be despised, to be broken or evaded at will, the source of adventure or of profit, but no longer based upon the plain teaching of right and wrong. "Can you blame any youth in this province if he grows up with a confused sense as to obedience to the law. He knows that the most conspicuous and the most discussed law of your statute book is a sham and a lie. He knows that it is broken everywhere. He knows that the methods used in its enforcement are often despicable. And he knows that there are enlisted in its service some of the most contemptible characters that walk the earth—the spies and informers that are the ears and the tongue of prohibition. "As between the paid informer, coaxing his victim to betray and the criminal, out and out, fighting against the law, which do you prefer; which is for such good as still lingers in him, the better man? I say it straight, the criminal. "That is the spectacle you are giving to your young men. What

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his life is his own. What service and obedience he owes to those in authority he renders as he should. But when authority passes into tyranny and law into oppression then his obedience ends. He stands, if need be, alone and single-handed against the law, but behind him as his inspiration he has a thousand years of the tradition of individual liberty. There is a spirit in him that things have never conquered, that parliaments have never compelled, that scourge has never beaten out, and that the fire has never consumed. PROHIBITION AND CRIME "Note well what has happened. Before the prohibitionist, had their way and before hysteria, fanaticism and mistaken desire for righteousness placed them in power, there was no more frequent argument, no greater mainstay, of their cause than the plea that

prohibition would lessen crime. See what has happened! It needs no statistics to prove the awful and appalling wave of crime upon this continent. The world stands horrified. In the streets of New York and Chicago human life is no longer safe. Organized robbery is everywhere and murder has its daily price and hire. "The reason is clear. The rising generation of today see all about them a form of criminal law called prohibition. They see it everywhere broken. They see it

think you, will be the result? You have broken with British liberty you have done with the morality of Jesus Christ, the relief upon the moving spirit, you have seized the sword to smite off the ear of your opponents—force, force and power and the tyrant's brutal delight in coercion, that is what the prohibitionist has chosen. "And the end will be his destruction. It may be in a year, or in ten, or in a generation. But of the end there is no doubt. "Of the present vote about to be taken the result may be this or that. I do not know. I do not greatly care. The sharper the tyranny the quicker the cure. But this I do know; that a government and a code of law based upon a lie shall sooner or later be dashed to pieces against the impregnable power of truth."

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