

Inaugural Address of Governor William M. O. Dawson

March 4, 1905

My Friends and Fellow-Citizens:

According to custom and in obedience to the constitution, I am here to take the solemn oath of office of Governor of West Virginia.. It is an office of high honor and of great responsibility. With deep gratitude to the people of the State for this mark of their confidence; with a distrust of my own ability to perform the duty required, yet with a firm reliance on the strength and justice of the people, and, above all, with an unshaken faith in the Supreme Ruler of States, I take upon myself this great trust.

In my remarks accepting the nomination of the political party to which I belong for this office, I said:

"If elected, and inducted into the high office of governor of the great State of West Virginia, it will be my constant endeavor to discharge its duties with malice toward none and with justice to all, and so as to promote the public welfare and preserve the blessings of liberty to all the people. A public office is a public trust, and was created, not for the benefit of the office-holder, but for the benefit of the people. This is a land of liberty regulated by law. Liberty not regulated by law is license, anarchy. In this free country there is but one law; the same for the great as for the small, for there is none so high as to be above the law; none so lowly as to be beneath its beneficent protection. We want law for the government and protection of the citizen, not for his vexation."

I am to be the chief servant of the people of this State, a Governor of all the people. It is not to be understood that I am less a believer now than before in the principles and policies of my political party. I am a partisan. A partisan is a man who believes hard enough to fight for that belief when necessary. But we must always be patriots before we are partisans - we must put the flag of our country above the emblem of our party. A political party is a means to an end, the end being good and just government. And this government itself is not the ultimate end of organized society. The ultimate end is the prosperity, the happiness, the elevation of the people. The government was made for the people, not the people for the government.

The office of Governor is a high and an honorable one; and while appreciating the high honor, I must think-most of the great responsibilities and burdens. In meeting these I have been fortunate in having had close relations with Governor Atkinson and Governor White; two men whom I found incapable of doing a dishonorable act, and each of whom was thoroughly devoted to the great trust imposed in him, and who discharged that trust with an eye single to the public welfare. Both are men of great executive ability, and every department of the government was administered under them with honesty, economy, and to the great benefit of the people. I cannot hope to surpass their achievements, and can only strive not to fall too far behind the high standard they set up.

I shall make mistakes. In the few appointments to office that I have to make, I cannot reward a tithe of the many good, deserving and competent friends who have applied. In selecting from

among them, I shall be accused of ingratitude; probably of bad faith. All these I must bear patiently, and trust the future to vindicate my acts.

It has been said that I am too friendly to labor. If it is meant by this that I would take from others their rights and give them to labor, the charge is untrue. If it is meant by this that I sympathize with the toilers, with the men who earn their daily bread in the sweat of their faces, who are striving to rise in the world, to put carpets on the floor of the humble home, pictures on its walls, and books in the library, and to educate their children, the charge is true. While I am Governor the humblest toiler will be as welcome to my office to tell his grievances and wrongs, as will the greatest capitalist to tell his.

West Virginia is a young State, vigorous and growing. Its development is a constant wonder. This rapid growth and expansion make it difficult to provide revenues, and to make changes in the laws and in the machinery of administration, in keeping with the needs of this growth. Inhibited by the Constitution from creating a debt, we must pay as we go. At the end of every two years is a settlement; we must come out square. We must not only take care of the present, but we must build also for the future, for the foundation must be fit for future superstructure. For a time at least we have reached the limit in the number of public institutions, and we shall find the burden of properly supporting what we now have great enough without adding materially to it by adding to the number.

We sell abroad a very large portion of our products. Hence, we are greatly concerned with the subject of transportation. Our chief products must be sold in competition with the products of other States. Three great trunk lines of railroad traverse this State from east to west, and over these chiefly must be taken our products to market. We ship to markets beyond our borders about twenty-one million tons of coal yearly. The average rate of freight per ton is at least one dollar; so that we pay out annually to carry our coals to market the enormous sum of more than twenty-two million dollars. An increase of ten cents per ton in the freight charge is a loss of more than two million dollars; and a reduction of ten cents per ton would be a saving of more than two million dollars. If all our coal were consumed near the mine we would save twenty millions of dollars yearly; if all were consumed within the State, our saving would be, perhaps, a half of this great sum. But as we have not the market at home, we must seek markets abroad. Therefore perhaps no other State in the Union is so deeply concerned in the question of just railway charges and of the prevention of unjust discrimination therein, as West Virginia. Unfortunately, the three great trunk lines on which our products must be carried to market, are controlled by one corporation, and that a foreign one, and one directly interested in products of its own which come in direct competition with our products. There has been much discussion whether the remedy is prohibition or regulation; it may be that somewhat of both is necessary. In almost every session of our Legislature since 1877 there have been attempts made to enact laws to protect the State against unjust freight charges and unjust discriminations by the railroads. These efforts have been usually in the form of bills to create a railroad commission or the office of railroad commissioner. None of these bills have ever gotten through the Legislature. They have been defeated uniformly. Even a bill for the appointment of a railroad commissioner with little more power than to investigate and report, met with the usual end - defeat. This matter is one of great

importance to the people of the State, and one to which they should give their attention when they nominate gentlemen for the Legislature, as well as when they vote for them. We ought all to hold up the hands of President Roosevelt in his courageous effort to bring about the enactment of proper laws upon this subject, and at the same time we should see that the men who represent us in our State Legislature vote for the public interest and not for private interests.

One of the great evils of the present day is the corrupt lobbyist at our Legislatures. There can be no objection to the presence of gentlemen at our Legislatures, who address committees, or present their views to individual members. Every interest has a right to be heard; and the fact that they pay men to advocate their side of a question, is not objectionable; but what is objectionable, and what ought to be stopped, is the paid lobbyist who resorts to sinister efforts and uses unrighteous means. He ought to be driven out of the halls of our legislature as Jesus Christ drove the money changers out of the temple at Jerusalem. The corrupt lobbyist must go.

Our development has been so rapid that the State has outgrown its clothes. Our Constitution is a misfit, our statutory laws need many amendments and in many cases complete revision, and our system of administration needs, many changes. New offices should not be created unless necessary; when necessary they should be created. There must be adequate machinery; but there should not only be adequate machinery to carry on the affairs of the government, but there must be a sufficient number of engineers to run and care for the machinery. To give an illustration or two, let mention be made of our insurance laws, and of our public building laws. The creation of the office of Tax Commissioner has already vindicated itself. If the late Legislature had adopted a code of insurance laws something like that contained in a bill pending before it, and created the office of insurance commissioner - provided the machinery and a competent person to run it - it would not only have added twenty thousand dollars of revenue yearly to the State treasury, but it would also have given the people of the State much needed protection, and put the State in line with other States in this important matter. If the Legislature had created the office of Superintendent of Public Buildings, as proposed in another bill pending before it, it would have benefited the people of the State and saved to them much more than the salary and expenses of that office. It has been said of our American system of government, that it is the freest on earth; of the English system, that it is the best administered on earth. In the English system there is concentration of authority and responsibility, there is adequate machinery. You require your Governor to take care that the laws be executed, but you do not provide him with adequate means to do this.

The time that I can use on this occasion is too limited to call attention to many other things that I conceive to be of public interest, and of which I should like to speak. There are, however, three questions to which I wish briefly to advert, namely, a juster system of taxation, a better system of education, and a better system of public highways.

As to the last named, the road question, I regret that the Legislature did not provide for a State Superintendent of Highways. His work for some years would largely be educational. Of the very great sum of money collected from the tax payers annually and spent upon our public highways, a very large percentage is absolutely wasted. Several years ago I investigated this subject in one of the most intelligent and progressive counties in the State, and the result of that investigation

was, that probably three-fourths of all the money the tax payers of that county contributed for road purposes was wasted and misapplied. This is a very heavy drain on the resources of the State. Not only that, but the condition of our roads is an immense indirect tax upon our resources. In many parts of the State for several months in the year the roads are practically impassable, so that the cost of hauling goods and merchandise is very many times greater than it ought to be. A state officer, such as I have indicated, would bring home to the people in every county these facts, as well as discuss with them the proper method of building roads and of maintaining them. He would save the people every year many times the cost of his office.

The need of change in our educational system is very great. In some parts of the State our rural district schools are inferior to what they were twenty years ago. I would not quite say that we are spending too much money on higher education, but I dare to assert that we are spending too much money on higher education compared to the amount we are spending for common school education. We should provide means for a longer term of school, for better pay to the teachers in the common schools, and whereby there could be maintained in every county at least one high school, and have a system of public education which should begin in the rural district school and end in the State University.

Underlying these reforms and changes, as well as nearly all others in our State, is the system of taxation. All good things cost money, and the State must get its money from the taxpayers. Hence taxation is fundamental. That taxation should be as just as possible; goes without saying. That every citizen or interest should pay his or its just share of taxes will meet with no outspoken dissent. Perhaps in the last ten years no other part of practical government has received greater attention than this same question of taxation. In this State we have had very earnest and somewhat heated consideration of the question in the last two or three years. Much progress has been made in the State in the past year toward a better system of taxation. Much remains yet to be done. It is one of the most important questions governments and statesmen have to deal with. It touches every citizen directly. Necessarily connected with it is the matter of methods. As lawyers have never agreed upon a definition of the word "law," so political economists have never agreed upon a definition of "taxation." This shows how comprehensive the subject is. The ideal system, as well as the scientific system, is perhaps yet to be discovered. What is taxation? for what should taxes be collected? upon whom and what should they be levied? are all questions in dispute. Such a problem, involving the rights of every citizen and interest, is to be considered without prejudice, passion or hate. I have been through two campaigns on this question, one for the nomination for the office of Governor and one for the election. Both were strenuous. In all I tried to keep in view one thing, justice. I stand today, as I have always stood, for a system of taxation as just as possible, just to every person, and to every interest. In both campaigns in all my public addresses I said: "I am not an enemy of corporations. I am their friend; and if I am elected to the high office of Governor it shall be my endeavor, as it will be my duty, just as strongly to safeguard their interests as to safeguard the interests of the humblest citizen. If I should not do this I would be unworthy of the great office." I stand now after the election where I stood before the election. The government owes to the citizen justice and fair dealing, and the citizen owes to the government support and obedience. These duties are reciprocal.

Dedicating myself to the discharge of the duties of the high office and great trust put upon me, praying the indulgent support of the people, and beseeching the blessing and guidance of Almighty God, I take the oath of office.