

Inaugural address
of
Stephen Royce
As it appears in the
Journal
of the
House of Representatives
October Session
1855

Saturday, October 13, 1855
Inaugural Address

Fellow Citizens of the Senate and House of Representatives:

WE are assembled by constitutional requirement, and with renewed authority from the people, to execute in their behalf the highest ordinary functions of State Sovereignty. The duty again devolves upon us to consider the municipal laws and regulations under which we live, and if changes and improvements are clearly needed to secure, enlarge and perpetuate their intended benefits, it is for us to devise and apply them. Many special and local interests also, if within the proper sphere of legislation, will doubtless demand investigation and action. And the Sense of responsibility to our constituents, which the discharge of these duties must necessarily awaken, should strongly remind us of our obligations of adoration and gratitude to the infinite Creator and Preserver for all His mercies; and especially for the general health and plenty by which the season is distinguished.

It is obvious that whatever tends to demoralize the people, to relax their industry, or to dissipate the avails of it, must also tend to retard the general prosperity, and to diminish or destroy the happiness of individuals. And whenever the cause of such evils can rightfully be removed or controlled by legislation, it should be employed for that purpose. Among the causes leading to idleness, poverty, immorality and crime, the unrestricted use of intoxicating drinks is, beyond question, the most effective in its disastrous results. And hence I take occasion to refer to our legislation prohibiting the traffic in such drinks, and again to recommend its continuance. Should amendments to the law be thought expedient, I think it desirable, but not with a view to forestall or prejudice other improvements, that the prosecution for each offence should be rendered more summary, still preserving the securities for an intelligent and fair trial; and that judgments and sentences, covering a great accumulation of penalties in the same prosecution, should generally, be avoided. The certainty and promptness of punishment are usually far more effectual in the prevention of crime than extreme severity. I also think that positive and open drunkenness may be properly declared a legal offence, and punished as a misdemeanor.

Your special attention will probably be called to the ever important subject of popular education. The action of the last Legislature failed to meet the expectations of many enlightened and patriotic citizens, who have long and zealously labored to advance this great interest in the State. Should their plans and views be again presented for your acceptance, they will merit, and doubtless receive, a candid and thorough investigation. It is not to be supposed that, with revenues derived chiefly from direct taxation of the people, we should be willing to sustain a system of education, even for our common schools, as artificial and expensive as those established in some of the other States, where ample and distinct funds are permanently appropriated to that object. Yet it should not be doubted that all improvements of paramount necessity or importance are always within our means; and I doubt not that such as you may deem needful and practicable will be adopted. And while the interests of our primary and subordinate schools are duly fostered, the institutions of higher grade, including our colleges, should receive all the aid and encouragement that may consistently be extended to them.

I think it my duty to bring to your notice that provision of our laws relating to the Grand List, which permits the respective lists of personal estate to be balanced or reduced by debts due from the owner. The subject must, be some extent have engaged the attention of your predecessors, but I know not how deliberately and fully it may have been considered. The provision was probably adopted to avoid double taxation of the same property, by treating its unpaid price in the hands of one man as a substitute for the property itself in the hands of another. It is obvious, however, that the notion of such a substitution cannot reasonably be carried to the extent of the existing enactment; and that this provision operates to protect from actual taxation a very considerable amount of personal property through the state, without securing any just equivalent in the taxation of debts. Doubting whether so general a provision of this character, if indeed any such, can rest upon the satisfactory grounds of justice or policy, I commend the subject, in its various bearings, to your thorough examination. And should you see fit to enlarge the basis of taxation, by subjecting to it the property now practically exempted under the provision aforesaid, I would advise that another effort be made to revive and sustain the Uniform Militia. The

necessity may at any time occur, of seeking protection from an organized and efficient military force, against sudden danger from abroad, or domestic violence. And the only such force which should or can be invoked at such times is that of the militia;— a force identified with the people and always accessible.

A deep feeling of compassionate regret and apprehension is not unfrequently experience, at the sight of children and tender youth imprisoned in the common jails as criminal offenders. There is reason to fear that this mode of dealing with such young persons has by no means the most salutary or reforming influence. When in that condition, they generally find little or no kind and active sympathy surrounding them, and soon come to view themselves as being stamped with the mark of permanent exclusion from good society, and from the honorable pursuits of life. And if to this be added the association in confinement with hackneyed and callous malefactors, the work of effectual depravation may but to soon be consummated. These considerations have induced me to recommend that Houses of Correction be provided for juvenile offenders. Such a mode of punishment would, of course, extend to all those minor and petty offenses, which are commonly the incipient steps in the path of crime. I forbear to enter into details, or to suggest whether such establishments should be the work of the state, or of counties, towns, or other associations; having entire confidence that all this will be wisely settled, if the main proposition shall meet your approbation.

By a resolution of the Legislature, passed at the session of A.D. 1853, the Executive was requested to make examination as to the expenses incurred by this State during the Revolutionary War; with a view to the presentation to Congress of a claim for remuneration, if that course should be thought advisable. Finding this resolution in force when I came into office, I thought it my duty to proceed under it. The examination has accordingly been made to a considerable extent, and I hope to be able, during the present session, to have the claim in condition to be presented, if deemed expedient.

In pursuance of a resolution passed at the last session, I appointed a Board of Commissioners, consisting of the Hon. Jacob Collamer, the Hon. Daniel Kellogg, and the Hon. Hiland Hall, to revise the present laws relating to Railroad Corporations; and their very able Report is herewith transmitted for your consideration.

By another resolution, at the last session, the Governor was directed to appoint a Commissioner to treat with the Iroquois Indians for the settlement of their claim to certain lands in this State. The Hon. James M. Hotchkiss, of Lamoille County, was appointed such Commissioner. His negotiations, as I learn, are not yet brought to a satisfactory conclusion.

Nothing has occurred during the last year, to allay our just apprehensions of danger to most of the vital interests of the free States, from the determined purpose of a part of the nation to extend the limits and influence of slavery. That purpose is understood to have been manifested in the territory of Kansas, by a course of successful menace and violence equally defiant of law and the rights of opponents. A design is also indicated, to break down that great principle of the common law, heretofore universally admitted and affirmed, - that a slave becomes free, when he enters a free state by consent of his master. The experiment has been tried, of purposely bringing slaves into a free state, and there claiming a continued property in them. And all these events would seem to have passed with and acquiescence, to say the least, on the part of national authorities, executive and judicial, which the true friends of freedom can scarcely contemplate with composure. The time has evidently arrived, when all who would oppose the further encroachments of slavery, should combine their vigorous and persevering efforts for that purposed

Suggestions of frugality in the public expenditures may be spared; as I doubt not you are already self-committed to a course of the strictest economy, which you shall think consistent with a just administration of the government in its various interests and departments.

You will accept the assurance of all that aid in your labors, which it appertains to my office to afford. And trusting that we may act under the favoring auspices of Divine Providence, I venture to anticipate a session of signal benefit to the people of the State.

STEPHEN ROYCE.

Montpelier Oct. 13, 1855.