

Is The Public Conscience Dead?

Johnson City Staff-News, Thursday Afternoon, July 29, 1926
By Carroll E. King, Editor

How great and how devastating a calamity will it require to awaken the public to a realization of the damnable sluggishness of the public conscience. It really seems that, as the *Brooklyn Eagle* says, "the public is interested only in gin and the movies." Can it be true, that as several great editors have recently remarked, "the public judged as individuals doesn't care what happens as long as "I'm not bothered."

Newspapers throughout the country have taken up the fight against official crookedness and through the publicity thus given men in high places who are being found guilty of serious crimes, some interest is being aroused. But much of this interest seems to be located among the friends of the crooks, from the high officials down to the depths of the underworld, and they naturally direct their efforts toward throttling the newspapers who are conducting the campaign for honesty and law enforcement.

Is civic virtue dead? **Josephus Daniels**, editor of the *Raleigh News and Observer*, says in connection with the assassination of Editor **Don Mellett**, of Canton, Ohio. "He was performing his duty with courage and wisdom, making his community clean and wholesome." Yet Don Mellett did not have the support of his community until after he was dead. "Leave things alone," he was advised by prominent citizens of Canton who did not want to be bothered. And when he took up the cudgel against the city officials who were guilty of many crimes against the citizenship of Canton, the very people who had been injured stood aghast at Mellett's action. **No one came to his aid and many even scoffed, while others predicted that he would not last long.**

But, "a newspaper is a public servant," Mellett told his associates, "any anything either directly or indirectly of interest to the public, whose money goes to conduct our nation, city and state, should be given to them and trust to their spirit to co-operate." But Canton, like Johnson City and many other cities, had only a few staunch citizens who helped. **In Canton, like Johnson City, none seemed to believe that the conditions were as bad as Mellett pictured them.**

Few realized that a newspaper cannot and does not institute a campaign unless it KNOWS WHEREOF IT SPEAKS. The courts of the country must have positive evidence "beyond any reasonable doubt" before a

conviction can be secured. A newspaper has far reaching sources of information. It must have. It receives from these sources of information authoritative data on matters which are carefully checked up before being used. For every sentence published, a thousand have been received and filed away. **When a crusade against an existing condition is started by a newspaper that paper is in a position of facts which are proof positive of the accuracy of its charges, yet frequently are of such nature or from such source that they cannot be used as legal evidence.** The crusade is started in an effort to arouse the public to a point where a thorough investigation will be made, wherein the facts known to the newspaper will be revealed in such a way as to constitute legal evidence.

Don Mellett continued his fight in Canton until the guilty parties began to go to state's prison. Panic struck the others and he became a martyr. But before he died the Mayor had been removed from office by the state and the Mayor's brother had been sentenced to the penitentiary, together with others. Canton then began to realize that Don Mellett knew what he was talking about, but before they could render any real help, it was too late.

Canton is but typical of the average American city. Carl C. Magee, of the *New Mexico State Tribune*, was recently a victim of the corrupt conditions among high officials. But he too, won his fight, after serving a jail sentence as a result of speaking frankly about crooked officials. There too, citizens protested to Magee about his attacks on certain officials but ultimately these self-same citizens apologized when the charges were supported by facts revealed and Magee had won. Over in West Virginia; up in Brooklyn; out in Washington; and up in Indiana similar fights are going on. **And in a smaller way like crusades are being conducted by newspapers in hundreds of American cities, among which might be mentioned Knoxville and Johnson City.**

But what are they confronted with? To again quote from the *Brooklyn Eagle*, **"Nobody attempts seriously to deny that law and order in this country are at a low ebb.** Newspapers have spoken frankly about conditions and are struggling bravely to bring about improvement. But the stone wall every paper has encountered is the utter indifference of the public. The moral consciousness of the public is undoubtedly so blunt that today it is almost impossible to get any reaction from it. Charges and exposures shocking wrongdoing in high places pass over the heads of the public and attract little or no attention."

"The duty and responsibility of American journalism is to bring about an awakening. The press must arouse the conscience of the public, keep hammering away at the evils that are destroying our civic life," continues the

Eagle. "In the present callous state of the public conscience, the press has a great duty to perform."

But how to do this? It seems, to take Johnson City as an example, that the only way to arouse the public is to hit the individual in the pocketbook. And even then, he wants to "keep it quiet." Only yesterday criticism was expressed of the policy of the local papers in giving publicity to evidence of wrong doing in the city government. What would you have? Can it be true that the public of Johnson City would prefer to stand idly by and give the impression that the people don't care how much crookedness goes on in the city administration or its employees just as long as "I'm not bothered?" Would you have such offenses condoned? As the *New York World* says; "Always those who have the most to fear from the press are loudest in denouncing it." If an official be honest; if a citizen be free from hypocrisy, he has nothing to fear. Investigation will exonerate him. But when a citizen or an official is heard denouncing the press, one of two reasons can be assigned. Either he has not familiarized himself with the actual conditions, or "the shoe pinches."

In Johnson City today there is entirely too much of a spirit of "let George do it." Prominent citizens will be overheard discussing law enforcement – but they do little toward aiding it. Others will denounce conditions if approached for assistance they quickly exclaim, "Oh no, I don't want to get mixed up in it." Certainly the privileges granted one citizen should be available to all. But if every citizen took that viewpoint how long would our civic or moral structure survive?

That condition seems to permeate a large majority of our citizenry. It even affects the operation of our police force. Officers are constantly being called to perform minor tasks while major offenses are condoned and nothing is said or done. And this even extends to the attitude of the citizenry toward the personnel of the police force.

Only a few nights ago a woman telephoned for police protection stating that she was afraid to go home and wanted an officer to clear the way. The official in charge courteously acquiesced stating that an officer and a car would be sent as quickly as one reported and she would be given transportation to her home. But she exclaimed, "Do you think I would be seen getting into a car with a policeman?" Her attitude was that a policeman was a man hired to risk his life in her service but that it was beneath her dignity to be seen with an officer even in the performance of his duty.

Again citizens fail to appreciate the fact that the police force is a "peace" organization. It is for the purpose of preventing crime, and so long as crimes

are not committed the police force is functioning and functioning properly. The number of arrests made do not gauge the efficiency of an officer. Some of the finest policemen in the entire country make very few arrests. They prevent crime and prevent disorder.

Our police force is efficient and it deserves the cooperation of the citizens. Officers are limited in their authority and cannot do the impossible. A few days ago a request was made that a police officer make a certain arrest. The officer had no knowledge of the crime or misdemeanor. He asked the complainant to swear out the warrant and the citizen became very indignant. "Why, you're paid to do that," he exclaimed, "**I don't want to get mixed up in it.**"

And thus it goes. A desire on the part of the public to be let alone. **Crime can run rampant – officials can do as they please – the public welfare can be endangered – but "don't bother me."** And when the press turns the pitiless glare of publicity upon evil conditions, or when the police attempt to correct wrong-doing, the average citizen shrinks, and criticizes and refuses aid.

As we said in the beginning, "how great a calamity will be necessary to rouse the public?" The press is gratified to receive criticism for even criticism indicates that its battle for right is attracting attention. And sooner or later the critics, who cannot have full knowledge of conditions or the ultimate effects of conditions, will realize that much good has been accomplished and that steps in the right direction are being taken. And until that time the press is content in the knowledge that it is performing the duty of the public. To quote the *Chicago Daily News*; "The criminal element of the country is in hearty accord with certain types of good citizens who hold that the newspapers publish too much crime news. The risks incurred on behalf of communities by the loyal services of newspapers, too commonly are unappreciated and misinterpreted by the very beneficiaries who complain about the prominence given the stories. Appreciative cooperation by the other agencies of progress comes only in the wake of understanding."

"The affairs of a community cannot be made any better than the people themselves want them to be," says **James M. Cox**, famous newspaper publisher. **But we have faith in the citizenry of Johnson City and this newspaper has faith in the future of Johnson City.** We feel that deep down in the hearts of the mass of our citizens there is a desire for good government; law enforcement and civic righteousness. And despite the protests and criticisms of those who have impaired vision, the Johnson City newspapers will continue the featuring of informative and corrective news in the future as in the past.