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Cartelism In Congress

IN CONGRESS you can make a career these days by being against cartels. It's as safe as being against sin and the common cold.

To be ultrasafe, you can be against cartels in Germany. Nobody wants cartels in Germany.

What Congress conveniently overlooks is that it is in itself a kind of political cartel. Or, rather, under certain circumstances it becomes a tight little political monopoly with freedom of action frozen to zero.

That happened over extension of the Fair Employment Practice Committee, first in the Senate and then in the House. Senator Theodore (The Man) Bilbo of Mississippi resorted to filibuster to block consideration of FEPC. He was ably assisted by his colleague, Senator James O. Eastland of Ruleville, Miss., who made one of the most shocking speeches ever heard on the floor of the Senate, in the course of which he slandered not merely whole races but the armed forces of the United States as a body.

Mississippi has a population of 2,184,000. In the 1940 primary election Bilbo got 91,000 votes, which was 29,000 more than his nearest opponent. Bilbo's total was less than 10 per cent of all potential voters in that poll-tax State. It is a small fraction of 1 per cent of all the voters in the country, yet, nevertheless, Bilbo can say no to all of us.

THE GREAT MAJORITY of Senators, who favored the FEPC, finally were able to break the Mississippi filibuster and included a provision for its continuance in a war appropriation measure. On the other side of the Capitol, FEPC came up against the perfect ring—an airtight trust—for preserving a political monopoly which in the past has repeatedly blocked progressive legislation.

This is the House Rules Committee. The Rules Committee is a bottleneck through which all legislation must pass before it reaches the floor for action. It is a very narrow passage; by comparison the Biblical needle's eye is a broad boulevard.

Of the 12 members of the Rules Committee, 6 are Democrats from Southern or border States. For all practical purposes, that is a working majority.

Two of these men, Eugene Cox of Georgia and Howard Smith of Virginia, are veterans who know every parliamentary trick. They are also two of the most reactionary members of the House.

In effect, Cox and Smith run that committee. They sit beside the monopoly toll bridge and say what shall get by. They are masters of the political trust which, by reason of the Rules Committee, the House has become. If 218 members sign a petition, the Rules Committee can be by-passed; but it's hard to get 218 people to sign any kind of petition.

Another monopoly device is called "senatorial courtesy." It has been used over and over again to keep back legislation that one or two individuals wanted to kill. In recent weeks, it has been used to hold up approval of plans for international airlines after the war.

TWO INDIVIDUALS, Senator Owen Brewster of Maine (population 847,226) and Senator Pat McCarran of Nevada (population 110,247), favor a community company to operate for America in the overseas field. This monopoly company, presumably representing all airline interests, would have the backing of the Government.

But the declared policy of our Government, as expressed by an act of Congress, is for competition in the foreign as well as the domestic field. A majority in the Commerce Committee and in the Senate itself are apparently still of that mind. Yet, by putting in a new bill for a community company, Senator McCarran, with the backing of Senator Brewster, has held the whole matter up.

The next time someone in Congress rants about cartels and their evils, the way will be wide open for a Senator or a Representative with a sterner sense of the realities to ask some leading questions. A political cartel can be more dangerous than an economic cartel. The one can be used to support the other, as has happened repeatedly.

Congress appropriates fairly generously for the antitrust division of the Department of Justice. Fighting the trusts, as Thurman Arnold has pointed out, is part of our political folklore. But Congress can begin right at home and do a good job of trust-busting.