Municipal Reform and the Furtherance by Reform Organizations

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As many and as serious as are the social and political problems which confront the earnest American citizen of the present day, there is certainly no one question which more imperatively demands his attention and careful consideration than that of municipal reform.

Beyond a doubt our American cities are the most corrupt, inefficient and extravagant in management of any in Christendom and our ablest students of

* An article by Andrew P. White on "The Government of American Cities" in The Forum for December, 1890.
government do not hesitate to admit, however humiliating the confession may be, that municipal government in the United States is a failure.

If this condition of mismanagement continues, if a system be allowed to remain in force which socially causes the interests of hundreds of thousands of citizens to be most grossly mismanaged and sacrificed and which politically encourages Bossism, the Spoils system and all the other evils of extreme party administration, our whole political system may in time become infected and the inevitable result...
of corrupt administration must
follow. Patriotism and justice,
his duty both as a Citizen and
as a man, therefore, should
incite every intelligent and
moral voter to aid in
remedying the existing con-
ditions.

But even when thoroughly
aroused to the seriousness of
the situation the ablest thinker
find the practical solution
of the problem of municipal
reform no easy task.

Municipal government
in this country is based on
the entirely false principle
that a City is a political organ-
ization and not a business
Corporation. This theory
tried by many cities of antiquity and in Italy during the medieval period and without exception resulted disastrously. It has for many years been discarded by all the best governed cities of Europe and not until it is abandoned in this country can we expect to have our cities properly managed.

In 1876 a commission was appointed by the State of New York to consider the evils incident to city administration. The main causes of the existing evils the Commission found to be first, incompetent and
unfaithfully governed boards and officers; secondly, in the introduction of state and national politics into municipal affairs; thirdly, in the assumption by the legislature of the device control of local affairs.

All three of these causes are direct outgrowth of the theory that a city is a political organization and all three would, we believe, cease to exist were our municipal governments regarded as corporations.

In treating of these three causes the first two must be considered very closely in connection with each.

* An article on "Cities and Towns" by Simon Steere in Labor's Cyclopedia Volume 7, page 465.
Other wise the second considerable,
slyly gives rise to the first,
and the first reacts to pro-
duce the second. The third
cause may be treated separ-
ately although it too depends
on its predecessors.

Inasmuch as providing
for systems of drainage, tess-
atulae, cleanliness and locomot-
ory the carrying out of police
regulations regarding nuisances,
the preservation of health,
the prevention of fires,
establishment of markets,
alarms etc., the creation
of parks and drives, the laying
of out, opening or paving of
streets. Clearly affect the
locality only and are matters
of business rather than of
State ownership—in short,
and much as the functions
of a city government are
purely executive in charact
and are concerned with
the administration of
endless complications
details rather than with
the establishment and en-
forcement of certain
general principles—
it
will readily be seen why
the introduction of state
and national politics
the management of city
affairs is more illogical
and productive of evil
results.

If a city is to be well
governed and its departments managed for the best interests of its inhabitants good city government must be the primary object of its voters in municipal elections and the integrity and fitness of candidates must be the essential qualifications for office rather than harmony in sentiment regarding national issues or strict party allegiance.

A citizen can not expect to vote for officials whose only recommendation is that they are sound Democrats or Republicans, that their views coincide with his regarding Free Trade, Free Silver, Protection or the Annexation of Hawaii, and then expect...
them to perform the duties of their offices with the fidelity and skill of honest experts who have had years of experience in direct preparation for their departments' work. Such action on the part of the voter can serve aid in obtaining the best management of city affairs simply because good management is not the end he has in view when he casts his ballot. What it does do is to strengthen his party as a machine, to increase party feeling, to define party lines more sharply and tighten the grip of party administration upon
The community.

Once the political machine is set going it is very difficult to stop. It is indeed, a very perfect piece of mechanism. In the skillful hands of professional politicians or bosses, who know their trade to a nicety, party organizations or rings in an incredibly short time gain a position which would be almost impregnable did they but know when to stop imposing on the patient, long suffering and much enduring public.

A verse known within the municipal government is describing the workings...
Of one of the most powerful of these machines, says:
"Tarnaby after a division of the spoils of offices sets about deadening the public conscience. It subdues the lawyers through a corrupt judge or two, through the Sheriff's and Register's and County Clerk's office. The leaders of the profession it soothes with all sorts of civilities, the juniors it threatens. It reduces some simpletons by small office. The rich of the business world it placates through low assessments and great obsequiousness. It secures silence or condonation.
or incredulity of the press
through business favors
or personal acquaintances
with the publishers or the
judicious distribution
of little spoils among the
reporters and contributors.

"In a year's tenure of office
Damny is always able
to create and diffuse such
a strong presumption in
its favor as once give an
air of expert knowledge
to the poor devils whom it
pick'd up for office among
the liquor dealers and
pugilists and looters.
So that any sincere political
adventurer, however ignorant
or corrupt, may rise
up before the astonished
community as an authority
on paving or drainage or
sanitary matters or general
administration."

Thus might have been
found in New York City
a short time ago a Com-
missioner of Public Works
whose sole preparation
for the place was service
as a clerk in a Justice's
Court and in the County
Clerk's office. A mayor
who received his training
in road houses and on
Race Courses and a Deputy
Commissioner of Public Works
who got ready for his position
by keeping a 'two'.
This is not true of New York alone but similar instances can be given in nearly every other American city. How is it to wonder at that under such conditions our municipal government is a failure? Is it to be wondered at that with such men in office our municipal departments are not only unscientifically and carelessly but even corruptly managed. Surely no other results could reasonably be expected or, indeed, need be expected. So long as state and national politics and party allegiance play any part in our municipal
elections. Not until the spoils system, the "machine" and all party administration have been done away with can we hope to have honorable and capable officials, and not until we have such men at the head of all city departments can we expect to have good municipal government.

The assumption by the State legislature of the direct control of local affairs, which was the last of the three causes of bad municipal government as given by the New York State Commission, is also directly attributable to the theory that a city is
a political organization and
that as such it should be
under the care of the State.
It will be noticed that all
Corruptionists studiously
strive to keep this theory
alive as essential to the
permanence and success
of their business. Munici-
pal officers are most
valuable and paying prizes
and as such are indis-
pensible to the boss as
rewards for his henchmen.
Parties realize that if they
were to lose the Control
of City Affairs the power
of their machine would
be greatly lessened and
Consequently they interwince
State and national politics as intimately as possible with city affairs. More our cities properly run as huge business corporations, regardless of political parties and political issues. Politicians would soon find that there was no room for personal gain in such management and the legislatures would cease to interfere and meddle with city affairs. But there are those who claim that municipal reform is not to be accomplished by abandoning national parties as tools but by reforming the
parties themselves. Under present Conditions our government is a government of the people, for the people, and by the people. Only in name. Were the responsible and better educated classes to take the prominent part they should do in city politics, were they to attend the primaries and nominating conventions, more they, in short to act with their parties, in the full sense of the term, instead of merely voting with them. The evils of the present system would vanish and we should have a
much more highly organized and effective form of management than can ever be obtained by so-called independent action. That there is much truth in the statement that our people do not realize their responsibilities as citizens and are not fully discharging their duties as voters every fair-minded and intelligent person must admit. That when the people have been aroused from their indifference reform can best come from within. The parties must, however, be emphatically denied.
Parties are undoubtedly essential to our form of national and state government but these parties are so constituted that they have to do with general principles rather than with business management and as such are unfit for city politics. There must ever be a certain amount of loyalty to party in the heart of every earnest citizen, for to a large degree the name of his party stands in his mind for his principles of government, and it is practically impossible for him if voting a party
ticket at all in municipal elections to be unembarrassed by his national party affiliations.

Then, too, the population of our cities has been terribly weakened in tone and average intelligence by foreign immigration and with our unqualified suffrage this ignorant portion of the community command great power. Parties tend to divide the intellect and morale vote of the city into two nearly equal and opposing camps, splitting upon false and irrelevant issues.
the forces which should stand as a unit for good government and causing the loss of power always consequent upon division.

Here are some enthusiastic but narrow reformers also who think that municipal reform can only come by the adoption of some pet system or change in the form of administration. Thus some hold that local authority should be concentrated as far as possible in one man. Others, that local government of any character is inherently bad. Some believe that we should have a qualified suffrag
While others think that minority representation is the true panacea for our present evils. All these workers fail to strike at the root of the evil and cannot, or do not, see that no system can be devised which of itself will give us good government. Our systems have all failed simply and solely because in their development the best men are not placed in office. Glasgow, Birmingham, Manchester and Berlin all have different systems, so called, but they all have good municipal government...
The one striking peculiarity or feature which they all have in common is that they put their best men in office and keep them there.

All the great departments in the Glasgow administration—public works, public health, street cleaning, law—are occupied for life by men who are among the highest authorities on their several subjects that are to be found in the British Empire.

A government thus constituted gives the city precisely the same kind of ad-
Ministration. Which the same men would furnish were they placed at the head of a great private enterprise and the result is a well-paved, clean, orderly, handsomely built city, with the rights of every citizen protected at every point—economically, so live in, with cheap gas and water, low rents and no breath of scandal through all its departments.*

Is it Glasgow's system which does this? Would this system if introduced into our American Cities and there managed by

 ignorant and corrupt men produce good results? Certainly not. To have good management there must be good managers and not until we have men of the highest character and ability in power - not until we insist upon having them and see that they are kept in Office after we get them - can our municipal government in the United States be anything but a failure.

The encouraging feature of the situation at present is that in nearly every one of our Cities there is a growing number of
Citizens who see the truth of the whole matter and who have banded themselves together for organized action in municipal reform.

Of the many societies of this character now in existence in this country, the Municipal League of Philadelphia is one of the most active, and as such a brief survey of its organization, objects, methods, and successes may not be out of place here as illustrative in a general way of the work and advantage of all such societies.

The Municipal League
Of Philadelphia is managed by a President, Vice President, Recording Secretary, Corresponding Secretary, Treasurer and a Board of Managers composed of said officers. One delegate from each ward association and twenty-five members at large. No person can hold a public office to which a salary is attached and at the same time be an office holder or manager of the League. Fifty or more members who are residents of a ward may form a Ward Association at any time for the purpose of aiding the League's work.
in that section, and in the same way fifteen or more members who are residents in a division may form a Division Association for the advancement of the Ward Association's work.

These sub-associations have, in the main, complete control of their own affairs but they are not deemed associations until they have been recognized as such by the Executive Committee of the League and Ward Associations respectively.

Any citizen of Phila-

Delphia, or one whose business is in the City,
may become a member of the Municipal League by declaring himself in harmony with its principles. There are no dues that the Association relies for its support upon the contributions of all interested workers.

The objects of the League, as briefly set forth in the By-Laws, are to eliminate all National and State politics from our Municipal politics to secure the nomination and election of candidates solely on account of their honesty and fitness for the office; to see that our Municipal government is conducted upon non-partisan
and strictly business principles.
And to encourage every true project for adding to the comfort and convenience of our citizens and to the prosperity and development of our city.

The methods pursued are: (1) Educational. By demonstrating to the public the advantages to be derived from the absolute separation of National and State politics from Municipal politics; and by the publication of a series of tracts on Municipal affair. (2) Practical. By nominating, endorsing, and supporting such candidates as ever best serve and pro-
more the objects and principles of the League.

But the question is often asked, "If the League enters the political field with nominations and to all practical purposes regards itself as a party in municipal elections may not its management be subject to all the bad influences of 'machine politics'?" "No," the League answers, "because our members are under no obligation to support League nominees when they are unsatisfactory and further the League has neither 'spoils to offer as a reward for unquestioning obedience nor
the power to punish dis-
Obedience by removal from
office.

The educational function
of the League belongs more
properly to the League as
a whole and the practical
work face naturally to the
Hard and Division Association.
Thus the duty of investigating
the correct principles of
local government and of
publishing all appropriate
information on the defects
and needs of our City
government is taken up
by the League while the
selection and endorsement
of proper candidates for
Office, House to House, Conservancy
and the consideration and investigation of complaints belong to the Ward and Division Associations.

During the year 1896-97 the Municipal League of Philadelphia was unusually active although owing to unfortunate circumstances it was unable to accomplish very much in the direct line of reform. Lead on by the pledges of the Republican Party and the results of the senatorial investigation into the Municipal affairs of the city, the League prepared bills for Charter amendments, the reorganization of Councils, the regulation of franchises, a tree declaring
double office holding of any character to be illegal and punish- 
able by forfeiture of the office, and a bill arising at the 
evils of executive legislation. 

It was soon seen however that the Republican reform pledge were worthless and that it was no time to 
expect the passage of such 
unenlightened measures. On the contrary, the League 
found it necessary to 
direct all its forces and energies to the preservation 
of the privileges the city already 
enjoyed and it was only by 
a hard and persistent fight 
against the politicians that it was enabled to succeed.
The Becker Bill was probably the worst measure introduced by the politicians. This bill encroached the Buelitt Bill, which although by no means a perfect measure has been in force for ten years and given great satisfaction. The Buelitt Bill distinguishes between administrative and legislative functions and commits the former to the executive departments and the latter to Councils. Had the Becker Bill been passed all the advantages of the Buelitt Bill would have been destroyed and the evil conditions existing before its passage in 1884 would have
been restored.

"Log-rolling" was re-
sorted to in the Legislature
and through the combined
vote of the supporters of
the Becker Bill and the
School Land Redistribution
Bill — another equivocous
measure — the former
Bill passed both Houses.

The Municipal League
perceiving the great danger
of the situation under the
cooperation of the Trades League, the
Board of Trade, the Business Men's
League, the Civic Club, and other in-
dividuals interested in the City's
welfare, to secure the defeat
of the Bill. A representative
Citizens' Committee was formed.
Through the efforts of these clubs and this Committee succeeded in securing the Governor's veto to the bill. The same Committee also directed its energies with the same success against the Apotz Bill, which provided that the amount of every mortgage, judgment or other lien should be deducted from the assessed value of real estate and only the remainder or equity be subject to taxation; and the Rodgers Bill, which if it had become a law would have entirely changed our system of appointing real estate assessors and would have introduced other unnecessary changes in our municipal system.

The Ward and Division Associations have also done much good work.
during the past year and although in the worst wards the League failed in the election of its candidates, nevertheless in nearly every case, the returns showed a marked increase in the reform ranks.

In the direction of investigating complaints the work of the Twenty-Second Ward Association is interesting.

**Work of the Twenty-Second Ward Association**

**To July 1, 1897.**

**Nature and Number of Complaints to July 1, 1897.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Complaint</th>
<th>Cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Garbage not collected</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirty streets</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Streets out of repair—attended to</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;   &quot; not attended to</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sidewalks repaired and new ones put down</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Streets resurfaced at our request</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossings put in order</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossings cleaned of snow</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building operations, taking up the street</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sewers to be flushed to avoid sewer gas</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordinances introduced for sewers</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;   &quot; street paving</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have Main Street cleaned at nighs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complaints of lamps not being lit</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordinances introduced to grade streets</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To repair a bridge</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dangerous places reported</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notices sent to members of ordinances that have been introduced that would affect them</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>250</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Such is a general grasp of the character and work of the Municipal League of Philadelphia and the same sketch might be applied to nearly all organizations of the same nature. So harmonious are these various societies in aim and polices and throughout the country is the demand for better municipal government that in January 1894 a Conference for Good City Government was held in Philadelphia. As a result of this convention the National Municipal League was formed, which has for its object the general consideration and correction of the evils of local government common to all our cities. Here are

Now seventy-seven of these organizations affiliated with the National Municipal League and such a powerful union cannot fail to aid the reform movement throughout the land.

It is perfectly true that a corrupt government cannot long exist among a virtuous people; for either the people are virtuous only in name or they will rise up in their power and transform the government. Our municipal governments are certainly far inferior in virtue to our populace and the time can not be far distant when our citizens will arouse them.
decrees from their state of indifference and apathy. 
That an era of better management is in store for us no one can doubt to who has faith in the marvelous judgment of the people or to who believes in the ultimate triumph of the forces of good over those of evil in every field. Nor can the student of the existing conditions fail to be convinced that the efforts of the Municipal League of Philadelphia and its sister societies are in direct furtherance of Municipal Reform and that their work deserves the hearty commendation and support of every good citizen.