

The Limits of Party Obligation.

(From the American Institute of Civics.)

(Continued from last month.)

The realm in which party fealty rules, as of right, does not, however, include the region of things which cannot be questions of political principle; which are at most questions of mere local business policy, of business ability, of common honesty, and such are, principally, one might almost say, exclusively, the questions which arise in modern municipal governments. These questions are not properly of a political character at all. Now here some classicist may interpose with a reminder that *polis* means a city, and that politics with the Greeks meant the affairs of the city. Admit this, but is the modern city the ancient city? Are their constitutions identical or even similar? Are their powers the same or even alike? Are the affairs discussed in and the acts passed by the governing body of a modern city, whether it be a town meeting or a council, and which affect the city, the same as the affairs discussed in and acts passed by the governing body of the ancient city, and which affected it? Most emphatically, no. The ancient city was the state—the nation. There was in Greece no central power, no nation, as we understand it, not even a permanent union or federation of states; bound together for a limited period, from time to time, when a common danger threatened, when that danger passed, the bond snapped, and the cities became again rivals and enemies, each to itself the state, and, although a common religion and participation in the same great religious festivals supplied a bond of sentiment and made the Greek look upon Hellenes, though not of his race, as favored by the gods above the non-Hellenic races, yet they did not prevent war between the cities or in any way tend to the creation of a power superior to the city. One city might, indeed, become tributary, through conquest or otherwise, to another city, but the city was still the state. The modern municipality is a corporation of limited powers, created by the mandate of a superior legislature, by which its rights have been granted and defined, and by which it may be deprived of those rights, except so far as the legislature is restrained by the constitution.

In the ancient city the citizen had to pass, whether in the Pynx, or in the *comitia*, or in the assembly, upon questions of foreign policy, of peace or war, of the enactment of laws of property, of the extension or restriction of the rights of suffrage or office-holding; he had to elect not only those who should administer justice and preserve order within the city, but also those who should represent her abroad, command her armies and her navies, make treaties of peace and commerce. Does the modern citizen, when he acts, either in town meeting or through his delegate in councils, pass upon such

questions? Does he not rather decide whether he shall have concrete, or Belgian block, or cobblestone, or rubble pavement on his streets? Whether they shall be lighted with gas or with electricity? Whether an additional reservoir is needed to insure, to the good people of his town, a sufficient supply of water? How many clerks he will allow a particular public officer to employ, and how much they shall be paid? And (the greatest question of all) what particular kind of public conveyance, controlled by private power and for private profit, he will permit to occupy his streets?

Does the citizen, acting as stated in the modern municipality, select generals, foreign ambassadors, or those who shall make laws upon great moral subjects, those who shall determine the relations of his city with all the world, whose unwise action may bring upon the city war and disaster, or whose wise and conciliatory measures may cause its harbors to be filled with foreign shipping and its streets crowded with strangers seeking to purchase its manufactures? No. The officers he selects are to see that deeds are correctly and with reasonable promptness copied into books; that writs are handed to whomsoever may purchase them; that the writs are served; that property taken on execution be sold by a competent auctioneer; that taxes are assessed at a proper amount to defray the municipal expenses; that those taxes, when assessed, are collected; that coal is shoveled into a retort that it may come out gas, be passed through a purifier and made fit for illuminating purposes; that firemen be employed and properly drilled and disciplined to preserve buildings from destruction by fire; that a police force be maintained to guard the peace of the city from the nocturnal brawler and burglar, and to pursue and capture the law-breaker. The questions submitted, the matters considered, the officers elected, have not to do with political affairs, taking *polis* in its proper sense when used to express a government, namely, the state; they have to do with municipal affairs in the modern sense, that is, with affairs which are highly important in that they bear upon the internal peace and good order of a city, and the comfort, health and happiness of the dwellers therein, but have nothing whatever to do with the relations of the city or state to the world at large, or with the policy of the superior legislature from which the city derives its power. This seems too plain for argument. Yet there are people who will persist in proclaiming by their actions, if not by their words, that there is no difference between the election of a constable and that of the president of the United States, and who regard the loss of one office equally with that to the other as a party defeat; the difference between the disaster in one case and the other being of degree and not of kind.

Now, what possible difference can it make to us or to the public, when we go to the office of the recorder of deeds, whether the man who copies our deeds be a Democrat, or a Republican, or a Prohibitionist, or a Populist, provided he write a fair hand and give the deed back to us in a reasonably clean condition, within a reasonable time? What difference does it make whether the man who oversees a job of street paving be a Democrat, or a Republican, or a Prohibitionist, or a Populist? What we want is a man who will see that the foundation of the street is laid according to the contract and according to law, and that the pavers drive home with energy the superjacent stones and make them firm. And when a brave fireman risks his life in entering a burning house that he may save the lives of its inmates, or drags his hose up a ladder that he may the more effectually direct its stream against the devouring element and check its ravages, do we ask, before giving way to feelings of admiration or breaking out into applause, what are his politics, or the politics of the superior officer by whom he is directed, or of the head of the department to which he belongs?

Yet there are men who will say that on account of the party it is necessary, or it is fitting, that all the officers charged with the performance of duties of the character just mentioned should be selected from among the persons of the particular political belief which they themselves happen to hold; that it is necessary for the party to control the appointment of the clerks, of the recorder or the register, the commissioners or inspectors of highways, the firemen, the police. Men seem actually to think, and practically do require, that a person must hold sound tariff or sound money principles, or be a believer in centralization, or in local self-government, or at least profess to belong to the party holding such principles, before he can be permitted to copy a deed, sell a writ, or arrest a pickpocket. And the people who practically teach and practice this doctrine have the actual support of the majority of the community; the actual support, I say, although many give it unconsciously, and would shrink from an expressed declaration of adherence to so monstrous a doctrine if put forth in plain, naked exposure.

At Hay Springs, Neb., recently the county and its bankers got into trouble over the county deposits, and the banks turned the cash over to the county. There was \$18,000 in silver dollars, which made such a large heap that the vaults in the county building would not hold it. The banks refused to take it back on any terms the county would make, and it is now guarded by an armed force in the court house.