

The Necessity of Municipal Union

Mr. Clinton Rogers Woodruff, Secretary of the National Municipal League of America after being introduced to the Convention spoke as follows: In the first place allow me the coveted privilege of extending to you the hearty good wishes of your elder sister in the United States: The National Municipal League. Founded in 1894 to

First. Multiply the numbers, harmonize the methods and combine the forces of those who are interested in good government.

Second. Promote the thorough investigation and discussion of the conditions and details of municipal administration and of the methods for selecting and appointing officials in American cities, and of constitutions, laws and ordinances relating to such subjects.

Third. Furnish data for public information and discussion, by the publication of the proceedings of the meetings, reports of committees, and other papers, books and periodicals bearing upon the subjects of municipal government and municipal affairs.

We have steadfastly sought to raise the standards of municipal life and administration. Your body—the Union of Canadian Municipalities—and our body have much in common—and especially the problems which we are seeking to solve.

Our constituency differs from yours. Your union is composed of cities and their direct representatives. Our league is composed of organizations and individuals interested in municipal problems, whether in or out of office. We welcome to our ranks and to our councils all who are studying the complex problems of municipal activities and therefore our angle of approach is somewhat different from yours. Not that we exclude the office-holder—our president was for eleven years the head of the department of taxes and assessment in Greater New York and the secretary has been both legislator and administrator, and others of our board and membership have held office or are holding office at the present time. Their membership and activity in the League, however, are not predicated upon office holding. That is merely an incident.

When the National Municipal League was organized in 1894, the municipal outlook was dark indeed. The old Philadelphia Municipal League and the City Club of New York were both feeling the need of an exchange of experiences and news and joined in a call for a National Conference for City Government, which was held in Philadelphia in January of that year and eventuated in the formal launching of the National Municipal League in May, 1894, with the late James C. Carter, Esq., then the leader of the American bar, as president.

For the first three years of its existence the League devoted itself to a study and analysis of the conditions in American cities. Then it was that the first constructive step was taken in the appointment of a Committee on Municipal Program which for three years devoted itself to the formulation of a form of constitutional amendment providing for municipal self government and a Municipal Corporation Act, which were explained in a series of papers subsequently published by the Macmillan Company with the text of the recommendations in a volume widely known as *A Municipal Program*. This report was adopted at the Columbus meeting (1899).

The *Engineering News* of New York, one of whose editors was personally present, had this to say about the result: "The Municipal Program adopted last week by the National Municipal League, is one of the best pieces of constructive work ever done by an organization devoted to the improvement of municipal government. In judging its merits or defects, it should be considered primarily as a declaration of principles, with suggestions for putting them into effect and continuing them unviolated. At the same time, the charter outlined in the Program is in itself a better and more complete framework for a municipal government than any existing city charter which we now recall. The Program has been made flexible in order to permit modifications to meet the traditions and needs of different states and cities; but certain fundamental principles are always kept in full view, especially as wide a measure of municipal home rule as is consistent with the interests of the commonwealth, "an opinion which the *News* has taken occasion to repeat on more than one occasion. In 1902 in answering an inquiry it said, "By far the most important contribution to the literature of charter reform is the proposed model charter and accompanying explanatory and critical papers published in 1900 under the title *A Municipal Program*."

Bradstreet's of New York fully shares this opinion, saying: "The feature of the proceedings of the municipal reformers at Columbus, Ohio, this week has been the presentation of a program of reform which deserves and should receive widespread attention from citizens interested in the betterment of the government of cities. Indeed, we can recall no formulation of the ends to be attained and of the method to be followed in attaining them at once so comprehensive and so seemingly fruitful in possibilities as that proposed as the result of careful deliberation by the committee on municipal program of the National Municipal League. Movements for the reform of municipal government have up to the present been largely sporadic, and in some cases they have carried within them the germs of reaction, owing in no small degree to a certain distrust of democratic institutions on the part of leaders among the reformers. The program to which we have directed attention is free from this source of weakness and aims to enlarge rather than lessen the amount and degree of popular responsibility.

"This program does not propose to leave the organization of the municipality, as it too often is, the mere creature of state legislatures. In that direction lies the ultimate frittering away of all responsibility for the good or bad government of cities. In common with the sanest among the wise who have devoted thought to the improvement of conditions in the government of cities, the authors of the program under consideration advocate a large degree of home rule." (1899).

So general and widespread was the use of the Program that Dr. Delos F. Wilcox, the author of *The American City* was justified in declaring in a paper on the Program that while "it has nowhere been enacted into law as a whole its influence has been felt practically everywhere 'under the flag' that charters have been framed, constitutions revised or municipal reform agitated. It was published by the Havana Charter Commission and by the Porto Rican and Philippine Commissions. It has left marked traces in the new constitutions of Virginia and Alabama, and has formed a basis for a sweeping amendment to the Colorado constitution. The Charter Commission of Portland, Ore., used it. The Charter Revision Commission of New York City adopted some of its provisions. The Duluth and St. Paul charters are in line with it in important respects. It has formed the basis for agitation for charter reforms in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, Delaware and doubtless many other states," and Professor John A. Fairlie, at the Pittsburgh meeting, concluded a striking paper on "Recent Charter Tendencies" in these words: "In the main, then, the principles of the Municipal Program of the National Municipal League have been steadily gaining ground. Its influence can be seen in the work of state constitutional conventions, in state laws and in charters for particular cities. In no one place, however, has it been adopted as a whole; and even where some of its principles have been accepted the details have often been modified. Indeed in several instances a distinct improvement has been made over the detailed provisions framed for ten years ago. The fundamental principles of the program still hold good, and should and will continue to be extended even more in the future than in the recent past."

In 1912 a second Committee on "Municipal Program" was appointed which three years later recommended the Commission Manager form of city government. The text and the supporting papers have been published by D. Appleton & Co. under the title *A New Municipal Program*.

Some conception of the scope of the League's activities may be gathered by quoting from a statement issued several years ago to the following effect:

"If you have a general interest in municipal questions and wished to keep informed of the latest progress and thought you can nowhere find more valuable material than in the League's annual special reports.

"If you believe that city taxes should be distributed fairly and collected economically, and hope for an improvement in present method, you will follow with pleasure the work of the League's committee on municipal taxation. Incidentally you can render a public service by assisting in the investigations of this committee.

"If you have found it impossible to compare or understand the involved accounts of American cities, and would like to see a simplified and uniform method of accounting adopted, you will find a system described in the publication of the League, which has many times proved its practical utility in actual service.